

Chapter 1

Wishes

Sitting with his back against the slide at the park near Privet Drive, as close to free as he could be that summer, Harry Potter absentmindedly stared at the clouds as they changed color. The sun was rising and this was Harry's favorite time of day: the pre-dawn hours followed by the sunrise when Harry was alone. These were the hours when he could force himself to watch the sky without thinking about the fact that Order members were tailing him and that his friends were at home recovering from the DoM attacks, the hours when he could think about Sirius and the stupid prophecy that Voldemort had thought so important that he set a trap for Harry.

"Take this from me," he whispered, looking up at the sky, not knowing to whom he was speaking. "Take this prophecy from me!"

"That's an irresponsible thing to demand," said a strangely casual voice behind him. Harry jumped up, wand drawn and pointed at the tall, black-haired man who had spoken. The man stood still, hands in his suit pockets, looking terribly out of place beside the orange swing set in the playground.

"Who're you?" Harry demanded, keeping his wand steadily in front of him. If the man were a Muggle, Harry would have to somehow explain why he was pointing a stick at him, but Harry wasn't about to lower his wand.

"Do you really think destinies can be so easily changed?" the man asked, not acknowledging Harry's question or his wand. Harry looked more closely at him.

"I know you," Harry realized, his grip on his wand tightening. The man was a wizard. "You run the rare bookshop next to Ollivander's. You dropped a bag of books or something in Diagon Alley once when I was there when I was thirteen. I helped you pick them up. What are you doing here? Who are you?"

"Destinies are unique to people," the man said. Harry was supremely annoyed by the way the man avoided his questions.

“Are you a Death Eater?” Harry asked, knowing that he’d be expelled from Hogwarts for using magic but running through a list of defense spells in his head just in case the man tried anything.

“Who would you want to take your place in the prophecy?” he asked.

“Answer my questions!” Harry demanded, hating any mention of that damn prophecy. “Are you here to threaten me? Is this a trick?”

“Do you feel tricked or threatened?” he asked. Harry didn’t answer, just stood, wand drawn and jaw clenched. If he hadn’t played Quidditch for five years and practiced with the D.A. all that year, his arm would have started to ache from holding his arm out that long in dueling position. “Who would you want to take your place?”

“Anyone,” Harry answered honestly, frustrated with this situation. “Anyone, but me.”

“That’s not true,” the man said matter-of-factly, “but you don’t really understand what you’d be putting on their shoulders because you don’t really understand everything with which you’ve dealt.”

The man meandered closer to the swings and pivoted, holding a chain in each hand as he sat on the low orange swings. Harry had been through enough to know that even seated, the man could still be a threat, could still try to kill Harry.

“I know what I have to deal with,” Harry said. He would have to kill or be killed. That was enough to know.

“No, you don’t,” the man said, pushing the ground a little and swinging a bit. “You don’t even really understand the risks you’ve already taken and the impossible tasks you’ve already completed, but that’s because you’re young, naïve, and a little self-hating. Besides, how can you think your life is odd when it’s the only way you’ve known life to be?”

“What are you talking about?” Harry’s back was to the slide, which supported him. He took two steps to his left.

“And it’s obvious that you don’t understand that prophecies don’t make the future. They only tell what may happen, but I understand what you want. You want Voldemort to have gone after someone else, marked anyone but you.”

“How do you know about the prophecy?” Harry asked, beginning to be truly wary of this seemingly-calm man. Only Voldemort, Dumbledore, Harry, and some eavesdropping Death Eater knew about the prophecy. And this man certainly wasn’t one of the first three.

“You would have someone else have the powers that Tom Riddle knows not,” the man concluded, almost speaking to himself as he continued to softly push himself forward and backward.

“How do you know about that?” Harry asked. Voldemort didn’t know that part of the prophecy. Actually, did Voldemort even know about the marking the baby as his equal part? Harry didn’t think so. Only Dumbledore and Harry knew the entire thing, right? So who was this man? Had he just called Voldemort by his given name?

“Would you have someone else be marked?” the man asked.

“Expelliarmus,” Harry said, deciding it was worth the consequence of expulsion to take this man’s wand, but no wand came. The man smiled at Harry.

“Would you have someone else be marked?” he asked again, not mentioning the spell Harry had cast or his own apparent lack of wand.

“No,” Harry said honestly, answering in order to buy himself time to figure out this situation. What was going on?

“No?” the man repeated, sounding skeptical. “But you just asked me to give the prophecy to someone else.”

“What does that have to do with anything? What are you doing here?” Harry took a step forward.

“You would trust just anyone with the responsibility to vanquish Voldemort and then face him again multiple times and survive?” The man stood up and put his hands in his pockets.

“That’s not—”

“You said you would trust anyone, anyone but you,” the man reminded Harry as he continued to swing gently on that silly little swing.

“Yes, but the first time it wasn’t even me,” Harry said angrily. “It was my mother.”

“Yes, but it’s always been you, too,” the man said, using his hands on the chain to pull himself into a standing position. “But you really don’t understand that. Teenagers are rather slow, I hear, but you seem particularly dim.”

“Who are you?” Harry was two seconds away from banishing the man into the street.

“If you honestly believe that anyone would be appropriate, I could choose anyone,” the man said, “but I’ll make it Neville because it’s easiest for now. You’ll have to tell me later who you would have take your place.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked tensing his arm again, ready to fight.

“If you really believe what you’re saying, we should start now.” The man rocked onto his heels.

“Start what?” Harry practically yelled.

“I always leave a way out,” the man said simply. “A fail-safe, if you will. One person will remember, the person you trust the most to keep the secret, and if you convince them of the stupidity of this truly stupid wish, they’ll make sure it never happened.”

Harry was beginning to believe the man was mad. "What are you talking about?"

"Who do you trust with the responsibility of the prophecy?" he asked. Harry looked at him, confused.

And that was when everything went black.

Waking up, Harry's first thought was spent wondering where he was. His bed was soft and squashy, unlike anything at the Dursley house and even with his eyes closed he could tell there was too much light for it to be Grimmauld Place. Instinctively Harry reached out and grabbed his glasses. Was he at Hogwarts?

He sat up, put on his glasses, and looked around, alarmed. Where was he?

Harry scrambled out of his dark blue sheets and stood on soft blue carpet, staring around him, confused, scared, looking for his wand, which he found on one of the nightstands. He grabbed it and cast a large Finite Incantatem, knowing he could be kicked out of Hogwarts for such an action, but choosing not to care.

Nothing changed.

There was a white door on the far side of the room next to a desk full of parchment and books much like the ones shoved in Harry's trunk at the Dursleys', but the open owl cage near the window was very different from his own. Seeing his own handwriting on an unfinished letter to 'G' scared him. What was going on here? Instinctively, he looked for a way out.

The window was open, but he had no broom and he was not on the first floor. The door seemed to be his only option, but what if it was a trap? Well, that hardly mattered at this point: he was in a strange room with no other escape. The people wanting to trap him could just as easily come in than wait for him to leave.

Plus, if it was a trap, why would they give him his wand?

Where was he?

Once Harry opened the door, he became, if possible, even more confused. Despite all of the obvious ways this would be an idiotic plan, Harry had still been half-expecting Death Eaters or something. Instead, he found himself in a hallway that would have made Aunt Petunia jealous. There were five doors, two on Harry's side, three on the opposite wall, with paintings hanging in between. There was a window at the end that cast light onto the soft, plush, perfectly spotless white carpet. But stranger than the general cleanliness was the tiny blonde girl who was running down the hall until she saw Harry. Then her eyes lit up and she gave him a large, happy smile.

"Harry, you're up! Come on. Mum has breakfast ready and then we can play!" the girl squeaked, grabbing Harry by the hand.

At the mention of "mum," Harry's heart froze. Who was this child? Why was she acting like she knew Harry, like he was her brother?

There was no time for questions, however, before the little bundle of energy began dragging him forcefully down the hall, down a set of stairs, and then into a completely foreign kitchen filled with sunflower imagery and light colors. The little girl ran up to the woman at the fridge, and hugged her. The blonde woman turned around.

"You're up early, Harry," she said as she picked the girl up and placed her on a stool at the counter. Harry, freed of the girl's hand, quit moving, choosing instead to warily stare at the woman.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"All right, maybe you're not as awake as I thought," the woman said, summoning two pieces of toast and a plate, putting them in front of the girl. "Butter or jam, Alana?"

"Both!" the girl said. The woman shrugged and started buttering the bread.

“Both what?” asked a voice to Harry’s left, making Harry jump and turn, wand pointed at the man with sandy-blond hair who just entered the kitchen.

“Both, please,” the girl – Alana – said, sounding very much like she had been asked to say please so often that she was beginning to think of it as a game.

“Good,” the man said, walking past Harry and giving him and his drawn wand a strange look. “Jumpy in the pre-noon hours, are you, Harry?”

“Who are you? What’s going on?” Harry asked.

“Well, I’m Christine, he’s Matt, and breakfast is going on,” the woman said, finishing the toast and putting it on the plate in front of Alana.

“Shouldn’t Hogwarts have taught you about breakfast?” Matt asked, sitting at the counter beside Alana and opening the Daily Prophet. “Don’t you have to get up early to go to class?”

“I don’t—What’s going on?” Harry repeated, angry now.

“Breakfast!” Alana chimed, giggling as she repeated her father’s funny joke.

“Good job, sweetie,” Christine said absently. “Now finish your toast.”

“I know it’s breakfast,” Harry snapped at both of them. The little girl looked over at him quickly at the sound of his angry voice. “I want to know why I’m here.”

“There’s no need for you to talk to Alana or Christine like that,” Matt said, looking disapprovingly at Harry over the top of his paper.

“Why’s Harry so mad?” Alana asked, looking at her mum with large eyes.

“Sleep deprivation,” Christine answered calmly, holding out a glass of orange juice for Harry to take. He stared at her.

“What’s deprivation?” Alana asked, taking a bite of her toast.

“A lack of something,” Christine said. Seeing that Harry not taking the orange juice, she drank from the cup herself before putting it on the counter.

“I’m not lacking sleep!” Harry exclaimed. Why were they acting like this was normal? Like he belonged there? He’d never met these people in his life. “I don’t sleep in.”

“It’s that the rest of the world rises too early?” Matt asked jokingly.

“No! I’ve never slept in,” Harry finally yelled, slamming his hand down on the counter. “Who the hell are you people and why are you acting like I belong here?”

“Harry, this is your home,” Christine said, suddenly not joking anymore. Matt, likewise, was looking at Harry in a very worried way.

“This is not my home!” Harry exclaimed, waving a hand around.

“What’s this about, Harry?” Matt asked, and now the paper was lying on the counter.

“I don’t belong here!” Was this a Death Eater trick?

“Harry, you’ve been a member of this family for fifteen years,” Christine said. “You belong.”

“What are you—” Harry cut himself off, remembering suddenly the man in the park, the man that asked him who he would change places with, the man who was the last thing Harry remembered before he woke up in this strange place, the man who said Harry would have to learn a lesson.

Harry was vaguely aware of someone speaking as he walked toward his vague reflection in the window above the sink. He saw his glasses, his eyes, his forehead-- his scar-less forehead.

Pivoting on his left foot, Harry raced back to the stairs and climbed them. He ran down the unfamiliar hallway. He pulled open one of the five doors in the hallway, trying to find the room he started in, but instead he found a dark room with a boy sleeping in a bed. He ran out, shutting the door behind him, tried another, found the bathroom, and finally found “his” room.

He scanned the room, found his trunk and shuffled through everything to find his money pouch and a change of clothes that he threw on without looking. What had that man done? The money pouch wasn’t where he normally kept it. He scanned the room, spotting it on the desk, ran over, picked it up, and opened it to make sure he had enough money for the Knight Bus. He did. There were multiple knuts and sickles, but something was missing.

“Harry, you all right?” Matt asked, knocking on the door and pushing it open a little more than it already was.

“Where’s my key?” Harry asked, looking up from his money pouch.

“Your key?”

“My Gringotts key,” Harry said quickly, spinning around to look on the cluttered desk.

“Why do you need it?” Matt asked, watching his search with growing concern.

“I just do,” Harry said, turning to face the older man. What did he care why Harry needed his own damn key?

“I suppose it’s in your box of things in the attic,” Matt said, looking carefully at Harry. “What’s going on Harry? Christine and I are worried.”

“I’m fine,” Harry said, deciding he had enough for the bus. “I’m going into Diagon Alley.”

Matt’s mouth set in a line. “Now?”

“Yes,” Harry said, walking toward the door and past Matt.

“It’s eight-thirty in the morning,” Matt said. “You haven’t eaten and you seem to be having a nervous breakdown. Maybe now isn’t a good time.”

“I need to talk to someone,” Harry said, walking faster. Matt grabbed his elbow, stopping him and Harry yanked his arm away out of reflex, already reaching for his wand as he crouched into fighting position. It took a moment for him to override his instincts and keep walking until he spotted the fireplace.

“Honestly, Harry, I don’t think you ought to go into town right now. You don’t seem well,” Matt said. “Maybe you should lie down and Christine’ll bring you some soup.”

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” Harry said, waving off the stranger’s concern.

Matt, who looked like he was in his mid-forties, said, “Harry, I’m really not comfortable with you leaving right now. Something’s obviously bothering you, and I—”

“Something is bothering me,” Harry said, seeing the fireplace at the base of the stairs on the left, in the living room, “but it’s nothing you can fix. I need to talk to a man.”

“I don’t think—”

“Trust me,” Harry said, marching forward and searching for the bowl of floo powder. It was on top of the mantel.

“I do trust you,” Matt said, watching Harry take a pinch of floo powder and throw it in after calling out, ‘Leaky Cauldron.’ Then Harry stepped into the fire and was gone.

Unconsciously flattening his hair over his forehead, Harry stepped out of the Leaky Cauldron and into Diagon Alley, heading straight for Ollivander’s. He pushed through the crowds, twisting around

strangers, past Fortesque's and Quality Quidditch Supplies. It was like tunnel vision almost, and he found his way to Ollivander's and then turned left to the rare bookshop beside it.

As the bell rang out, Harry tried to locate the owner. It wasn't hard; He was helping bag a patron's books and saying, "Thank you for shopping at Rare Books."

"Oh, I've always loved your shop, Robert," she said, shrinking the bag of books and putting it inside a larger bag she carried on her shoulder.

"I'm glad," Robert said, nodding over her head at Harry, "because I don't think he's quite as happy as you."

The woman turned to follow his motion and saw Harry scowling in the doorway. "No, he doesn't seem very happy at all."

"In fact, he's probably seething," Robert said. "Or brooding. Something melodramatic and angsty, no doubt."

"Oh, he's Harry Potter isn't he?" the woman asked, smiling at him. Harry grimaced. "Having a shopping day, are you?"

He wasn't used to people talking to him. They normally just stared awkwardly. Or they asked him to sign something, which was much worse. But now he had to answer her question despite his rush to talk to that man—Robert—about what the hell he did to Harry. So the green eyed boy told her he was indeed shopping.

"Well, I hope you have a good time. Be sure to look in the back left section, it's great for school children," she said, walking past him and out of the store. There was something different about that interaction. Harry brushed it off. Everything was off.

"What can I do for you, Harry?" Robert asked pleasantly, as if the boy had just stopped in for a normal chat. Harry approached him, remembering his anger and confusion.

"You can change it all back," Harry suggested. The man picked up a stack of books and walked around the desk. He began to walk through the aisles. Harry followed.

"What do you mean?" he asked innocently.

Harry glared. "You were the one that changed everything."

"Yes." Robert was so casual about the admission that Harry was momentarily confused. Then he shrugged that off.

"What did you do? Why did you do it?"

"I brought you to a world where you can see yourself from the outside," Robert said, shifting the book in his hand so that he could take one out of the stack and put it on the shelf. "I thought you'd be more grateful, actually."

"Grateful?" Harry exclaimed. "Why would I be grateful?"

"I've given you the opportunity to fulfill your wish and find your answers."

"What answers?" Harry asked. "I woke up this morning in a bed that was not my own, in a world where I'm living with strangers who think I'm their son—"

"They don't think you're their son," the man said, putting another book on the shelf.

"What? Then who are they?"

"The McGraths adopted you when you were a baby after your parents—"

"Fine, whatever," Harry cut him off, not really caring. "Bring me back to my world!"

"Why would I ever do that?" Robert asked, sounding honestly confused. "You haven't changed yet, haven't discovered who you

trust to take your place or who you trust with your secrets. You still think you're not all that important and that the prophecy is transferable."

"Take me back," Harry said stubbornly.

"I'll take you to a new world, which ever world you choose, as soon as you tell me your answers."

"What answers?" Harry repeated, terribly frustrated.

"Who would you want to take your place? Who would you want the prophecy be about if not you?" the man answered.

"I'm not going to pick someone for that," Harry said.

"You said, 'Take this prophecy from me,' and I asked who you'd give it to and you said, 'Anyone,' and I said, 'Anyone?' and you said, 'Anyone but me.'"

"Right, but—"

"So I brought you here in order for you to be able to chose someone specific."

"I'm not going to choose something!" Harry wanted to throw all of his books into the wall. Then cast an Incendio.

"Why not?"

"Just take me home."

"That's not up to me," Robert said. "If you want to go, you need to convince the person you trust the most to keep the secret of your other life."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that the person you trust the most not to talk about your old world knows and remembers your natural world. Figure out who you

want to replace you, convince that secret keeper, and then you'll have that world."

"If you knew who I trusted the most, you must know who I trust with the prophecy," Harry said.

"Yes," the man said, shelving another book.

"Then just make that world!" Harry glared at the back of the man's head, willing it to explode. Harry had enough to deal with this summer without some crazy bloke playing a prank on him

"The point is for you to know who you trust," Robert said a bit snappishly, annoying Harry more.

"No, there is no point to this stupid thing! I woke up this morning in a home I've never seen with people I don't know—"

"Exactly. You couldn't pick your replacement in your world so I brought you to an unfamiliar one where you can see the responsibility of the prophecy through your easiest replacement," he said, obviously frustrated with Harry for not understanding this.

"My easiest replacement?" Harry repeated.

"Well, the one it was easiest for me to arrange," Robert said.

"I don't understand." Why couldn't he just change it back?

"You don't have to," the man said, setting the books down on the footstool and facing Harry. "Just go home."

"That's all I want to do!"

"I meant go home to the McGraths."

"That's not my home."

"But it could be," the man said. "Or, at least, it's a place where you can find your answers."

"I don't have any questions," Harry said again.

"Everyone has questions," the man said simply. "And maybe they'll help you find those as well."

"Who are they?"

"See, you already found a question," Robert said proudly, turning and picking up the books.

"Are they Death Eaters? Are you?" Harry asked.

The man stopped and looked at Harry for a long moment over the top of the books in his arms. "I'm no Death Eater. Neither are the McGraths. They are—well, you can find that out for yourself."

"How do I know you're not lying?"

"You don't," he said, shrugging, "but as I just performed the amazing feat of changing the entire history of the world without bothering to try and kill you, maybe you ought to try to figure out who you trust the most with the responsibility of the prophecy and focus on the other things secondarily."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because you made your wish—though admittedly a stupid one—and told me you'd trust anyone but you with this responsibility. I want you to know who you'd really trust."

"Why? If you have all of this power, why not just pick the right person?" Harry asked. The man looked at him again.

"Because it's your choice, your wish, your responsibility to give away," the man said, turning around and handing Harry a few books to hold for him as he climbed a stepladder.

"I hate you for this," Harry said as the man took the book from him and put it on the shelf.

"You're fifteen, you hate everyone right now, but as long as your anger serves a purpose, teaches a lesson, it's fine." He was so frustratingly nonchalant. "Go back to the McGraths now, your family in this world. Their home is called the Stump."

"To get back to my world, I just need to find the one I trust the most to keep the secret and tell them who I trust most?" Harry asked through gritted teeth. This was so stupid. Like some sort of game to determine the fate of the world.

"What's your obsession with going back to your natural world? I'm offering you a new world where your wish is a reality, where you have what you wanted: a life free of the prophecy," Robert said. "Why are you so opposed to that idea?"

Harry didn't know what to say, and said so.

"I think, Harry, that that's one of the questions to which you need to find an answer. Go to the Stump and find your answers," he said, turning with his stack of books. "Oh. But first, go to Ollivander's."

"Why?" Harry was trying to put this together.

"Because that wand was made for a different you, a you without your memories, a you raised by the McGraths, a you not connected to Voldemort."

Harry started. "I'm not connected to—"

"You were never marked."

"I have no scar. I can't speak parseltongue," Harry said, thinking aloud. "I don't have to kill him. He isn't trying to kill me."

"No," Robert said condescendingly, "he's not."

And maybe that was the moment that Harry realized the full potential of this gift, this new world. The man seemed to have noticed that Harry was beginning to understand.

“Go buy a new wand,” Robert said. “Then go home and figure out who you trust.”

Harry was shaken, thinking about this. He could pick anyone, anyone in the world, to take his place. He could pick someone strong and smart and capable, someone to duel the Dark Lord and defeat him. Someone who wasn't merely lucky, but had actual talent. He could find the person that needed to lead the Order. In the meantime, Harry could be normal. Normal.

Harry looked at Robert and asked, “What's in this for you?”

“You are a cynic, aren't you?” Robert asked with a smirk, looking down at Harry.

“Why are you doing this?” Harry repeated his earlier question, but this time with this hostility and more interest in truth.

“Because in the end I get a savior, Harry,” he said. Harry took a step back and shook his head at the man. Giving someone the prophecy was not creating a savior. That would mean that for all of the years of his life that's what Harry had been, and that wasn't right.

“I'm no savior,” Harry said.

“Then pick your own as well.”

Author's Note:

I hope you all enjoyed this. I just wanted to post the first chapter and see if there was some interest. I need something to do while waiting for the sixth book and this will be really fun. It takes place in the Prelude to Destiny/Backfire universe. Check out my livejournal if you want!

Miranda

Chapter 2

Stumpy

The Stump was a gorgeous home. Stunning, really, with soft colors and a constant smell of flowers or food or pets or, and most especially, family. Coming out of the fireplace, Harry almost stumbled, but someone caught his arm, surprising him a great deal. He yanked his arm away reflexively and pointed his wand at the person in front of him before he recognized that it was Christine McGrath—the little girl Alana’s mum who had tried to feed him orange juice early that morning and teased him about sleeping in. He put his wand in his pocket again, though he didn’t let it go.

“Welcome back,” Christine said, backing away from him, hands on her hips and a smirk on her face. “Had a bit of an itch to shop, did you?”

Harry blinked. “I suppose.”

After the way he had spoken to her that morning, Harry hadn’t exactly expected a warm reception from this tall blonde woman. If Harry had spoken to Mrs. Weasley the way he spoke to Christine, she would have raised hell. She also most likely would not have stopped screaming until next Tuesday. Unless they went to a World Cup and their lives were threatened. Then she would have given him a hug. But that was a different story.

“Did you buy anything?” Christine asked, walking toward the stairs. Harry looked around and then awkwardly followed her.

“I bought a wand,” Harry said. Christine turned to look at him. He held out his wand.

“You didn’t have to buy that with your pocket money,” Christine said, taking it out of his hand and giving it a swish to produce a lot of rainbow-colored bubbles.

“Oh, er,” Harry didn’t know what to say. He just wanted his wand back.

“Pocket money is for fun things, like sweets or presents for girlfriends, which is what I thought this trip was all about.” She held his wand out to him. “How much did it cost?”

“A couple galleons,” Harry said, taking his wand back.

“Are you packed yet?” Christine asked.

“Packed for what?” Harry asked before he could remind himself that this was something he probably ought to know about. He didn’t want to give himself away as being totally new to this place. They would, no doubt, think he’d gone mad if he told them he remembered a completely different history from their own. Besides, he sort of wanted to pretend like maybe this could be his life, was his real life.

“I know you’re upset about our trip overlapping your birthday, but you couldn’t have forgotten about going in general,” Christine said, shaking her head at him even as she kept smiling her smile. She placed a soft hand on his shoulder. Harry moved away from her. “Well, you could have forgotten, I suppose, but I’ve raised you and I haven’t seen any signs of giant memory lapses yet.”

“No. I knew we were going somewhere, I only forgot where exactly,” Harry said, lying a poor lie.

“Villa. Tuscany. Eight weeks. Come on, Harry,” muttered a boy about Harry’s age walking down the stairs, yawning. He didn’t seem to move his mouth as he talked.

“Good morning, Andrew,” Christine said, smiling at him.

“Morning, Mum,” he said, walking past her.

“It’s ten ‘til noon, you’re early,” Christine said. Andrew turned around and tried to climb the stairs again, but Christine put a hand on his shoulder and turned him back toward the kitchen.

“But, Mum, I still have ten minutes of sleep possible!” Andrew said. He looked a lot like that Matt guy who had been in the kitchen, Harry noticed. But what was this business about a Villa for eight weeks?

“Harry’s been up since eight this morning. He’s even made it into Diagon Alley while you were sleeping.”

“Why?” Andrew asked first Christine and then Harry. “Oh, right, it’s nearly the girlfriend’s birthday, isn’t it? What did you buy?”

“A wand,” Harry answered. Andrew gave him an incredulous look, chuckled, and shook his head.

“She’s going to hate it, though you two are officially broken up right now so I don’t suppose it matters what you buy her,” Andrew said. Christine made a quiet exit up the stairs after reminding both boys to finish packing.

“The wand’s for me,” Harry said.

“Oh, good, then you won’t get another Howler like last year,” Andrew said, heading into the other room. Harry followed. “I know you planned to rile her up, but you really did not have to send it to her at midnight. Mid-morning would have been just fine for upsetting her.”

“Who are you talking about?” Harry asked, curious.

“Wow, you really are angry with her, aren’t you?” Andrew asked.

Despite Harry’s best efforts, he could not get Andrew to drop the girl’s name. Not at all. But Harry realized he could probably find this information out fairly easily from someone over the course of the summer and it didn’t bother him as much. Okay, it bothered him a bit, but not so much that it incapacitated him.

“Boys!” Matt McGrath called from upstairs. “You need to finish packing within the hour. The house-elves are bringing the things over at two.”

“I guess I ought to go pack now then,” Harry said. Andrew seemed to agree as he threw back the last of his orange juice and raced up the stairs. It was a lot like the day before leaving Hogwarts for the holidays. Harry, who always ignored all of Hermione’s constant

reminders to pack early, annually ended up shoving everything into his trunk at the last minute.

The house-elves came and went with the trunks and soon the whole family was flooing long distance, making three stops to check identification. For Harry, who had never been abroad (unless Hogwarts counted), this was rather exciting. For the rest of the family, it seemed perfectly natural. Even five-year-old Alana looked merely bored at all the traveling.

The third McGrath child, thirteen-year-old boy Stephen, was most careful about doing things in order, giving the wizards exactly what they were asking for exactly when they asked for it. Christine chatted with all of the officers in whatever language they happened to speak. It was rather amazing.

Still more amazing was the villa itself when they arrived. It included a Quidditch field in the back. Harry would be sharing a room with Andrew, who immediately picked up a broom, yelled for Harry to grab his, and started a family pick-up Quidditch game.

Matt, Stephen, Andrew, and Harry all played. Alana played on her toy broom a few feet above the ground as Christine lay on the grass, watching.

It was the most relaxed game of Quidditch Harry had ever played. No one seemed obsessed with winning or even competing. They threw the Quaffle back and forth with the ease built from years of working together. Harry felt very much like an outsider.

"Just wait until the Ryans get here and we can play a real game," Stephen said, landing and moving to the dining area for dinner. Harry landed beside him.

"The Ryans?" Harry asked. He hadn't known another family was joining them.

"I know they're all girls and they say they don't want to play, but maybe they will this time," Stephen said, whispering to Harry, "If Nadine and Andy aren't too busy snogging."

Harry smiled uncertainly.

The Ryans arrived the next day during lunch, their luggage already in their assigned rooms. And if Harry had been uncomfortable and awkward around the McGraths, who acted as though he were their son, he felt even more uneasy near the beautiful Ryan girls who hugged him like Hermione, as if they were close friends.

Soon enough, though, the two families broke off into pre-arranged groupings: Matt, Christine, and Alana with the Ryan parents (who were leaving the girls there and going abroad for work for the next two months); Andrew and Nadine, the girl that seemed about Harry's age; Stephen and the youngest sister; and Harry and the eldest sister. It was confusing. The Ryans all had names that started with Ns.

"Naomi and you should go shopping for your significant others together," Mr. Ryan had suggested, walking past Harry and Naomi at lunch. Naomi looked at Harry and ate a bite of pasta.

"What's my girlfriend's name?" Harry asked Naomi.

She looked at him carefully for a moment before shaking her head with a resigned sort of condescension. "You two broken up at the moment?"

"I guess." Harry wanted to bash his head into the table. Why wouldn't anyone ever just casually mention the name? Ever?

"Too bad," Naomi said, not sounding particularly sincere or as though she cared. She wiped up the last of her pasta sauce with her bread. Harry looked at the last of his pasta and pushed it away.

"What's this?" Andrew asked, sitting down next to Harry as Nadine took the other empty chair. "Harry Potter turning down food?"

Harry shrugged at him.

Naomi looked at the plate for a while, but covered the awkward moment by asking, "What are Nadia and Stevie up to?"

"Well, Nadia's probably thinking up ways to be exported and Stevie's following along like the good friend that he is," Andrew replied, picking up a fork and dragging Harry's plate across the table in order to eat the rest of the pasta.

"Andrew, do you—" Harry began.

"Andrew?" Andrew repeated, shaking his head but smiling. "Decided to be formal today, have you? Or is it just that you hate nicknames now like Mum?"

"Er," Harry said, "I only wanted to see your reaction."

"I suppose it's a little underwhelming, huh?" Andy asked, laughing a bit. The way Andy continually looked over at Harry as if sharing an inside joke reminded Harry of talking to Ron, only not really since Andy was a stranger. Nadine reached over and plucked the fork out of his hand to take a couple of bites, but Naomi just kept peeling her orange, eyes locked on her work. Harry let the conversations go on without him.

A week at the villa had not made Harry any more comfortable amongst the Ryans and McGraths as a whole, but he had learned everyone's names; their real ones and the ones he was actually supposed to call them. Then, just when Harry began to understand the workings of the villa—which staircase to take when he wanted to eat and which he took to go to the Quidditch field—the family headed off for a day trip to Rome. Which was sort of great. Harry saw a lot of things he had heard about in History of Magic. Or which Hermione had heard about in History of Magic and later related to him right before an exam.

Not that Rome was magical. Actually, that was one of the most interesting pieces of information about the city. With the single exception of Agrippa, Caesar Augustus's son-in-law, there were no

notable magical people in the history of Rome, meaning all of the statues and monuments were created by Muggles.

On the tour bus, Andy tried to pick up Alana and put her on his lap, but the five-year-old twisted out of his grasp and climbed onto Harry. She was small and warm and talked non-stop. Harry was very uncomfortable with her proximity but tried not to act that way. Maybe she was used to sitting on him. Harry let her talk as he looked around the city. Andy and Nadine were on the bench behind him, and Stephen and Nadia were two rows in front taking pictures of everything. Naomi (the Ryan sister who was going to be a seventh year) sat to Harry's left, quiet for the most part. Christine and Matt sat side-by-side, pointing to various things, smiling, chatting, and glancing back at their kids every now and again.

Alana poked him in the belly. Reflexively, Harry grabbed her hand and yanked it away from his body before she was time to move away. He looked down into her large brown eyes and smiling, trusting face, at her little hand in his. He could crush her hand, if he tried. He let her go quickly.

"I want a gelato," Alana said, oblivious to the threat he had just posed to her hand.

"Er," Harry said, not knowing how to respond. Three seconds of silence.

"Bored, are you?" Naomi asked, coming to the rescue as she tickled Alana, who laughed and playfully pushed the older girl's hands away. "Do you know where we are, little duck? We're in Rome."

"We're in Rome!" yelled Andy and Nadia in unison, raising their right arms. Then they laughed at themselves.

"So?" Alana asked, turning around to look at Harry.

"So Rome is where the world began," Andy answered for Harry, leaning forward so that Alana could see him.

“That’s an exaggeration,” Nadine said. Andy leaned back and covered her mouth with his hand as he looked at his little sister.

“That is not an—ouch! She bit me!” As Andy and Nadine started squabbling, Alana turned to Harry for an explanation.

“Rome is really old,” Harry said, trying to think of reasons why a five-year-old might be excited to be in Rome. Why anyone ought to be excited. What did he like about it? “And it’s big.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because the ancient Romans liked building big things?” Harry guessed. It was a shame Hermione wasn’t there. She would have loved to teach Alana about the intricacies of the city and its history, and probably the reason why the road they were on went from wherever it started to wherever it ended.

“Why?” Alana was rather persistent with these whys. Harry knew the way the Dursleys would answer: Because it is. Don’t ask questions.

“So things would survive for a long time. And so people would notice,” Harry said, trying his best to actually respond but feeling very lost. He looked at Naomi and shrugged. She hesitated a moment, but then smiled at him and bent down so that she was at eye-level with Alana, her black hair framing her face.

“See that over there?” she asked, pointing to a stone thing to their right. Alana looked over and nodded. “That’s the Arch of Constantine, built around 410.”

“410 this morning?”

“410 AD, 1600 years ago,” Naomi said, making her pretty eyes widen to show Alana how long ago that was.

Alana gasped. “That’s as old as Dumbledore!”

“A bit older,” Naomi said, her face relaxing as she smiled. And so the tour progressed, Harry’s legs gradually going numb as Naomi and

Alana talked about old buildings that Harry probably would have known more about had he not slept through the last five years of history class.

The bus eventually stopped at the Colosseum and the guide suggested that everyone take a tour of the Flavian Amphitheater, as the Colosseum was officially titled. They all did. Harry let Naomi and Alana wander away.

“Letting Naomi play tour guide for a while?” Andy asked Harry, who shrugged.

“I don’t know anything about this stuff,” Harry admitted.

“Who are you and what’ve you done with the real Harry?” Andy asked, laughing. From the clap on the shoulder, Harry assumed he was just joking.

The tour was long. The sun was hot. The building was falling apart. The guide kept prattling on about Titus and his cheap father and all sorts of other things and he wasn’t making it sound any more interesting than Binns had.

“Come on, Harry,” Christine said, walking past Harry as she addressed him. Harry happily followed her away from the tedious guide.

“Where’re we going?” Harry asked, glancing back at the group they’d left behind.

“I told Matt the Unadventurous that we’d walk back to the Floo station,” Christine said, beginning to climb the worn stairs. Harry climbed beside her.

“It’s pretty far,” Harry said. Besides being generally worn past all convenient ability to climb them, the stairs were also really small.

“True,” Christine said, taking out her wand and unlocking a gate that looked like it was there to protect people by keeping them from going higher, but if there was anything Harry had learned about Christine in

their short amount of time together, it was that she did not let minor problems like fences stop her from doing or saying anything.

They climbed until they reached the highest point they could reach in the amphitheater and then stopped to look down at the gutted arena. It was, in a word, spectacular. The old stone crisscrossed in large chunks across the floor as the rows and rows of seats stacked on top of each other around it. But probably the most amazing feature was the missing wall of the far right side. Someone had built this place so well that when an earthquake hit it and a portion broke off, the rest of it still managed to stand. Spectacular.

“It’s it great that Muggles see the exact same thing from here?” Christine asked, leaning against the stone in front of her.

Harry had been busy staring at the tiny people in the arena. “What?”

“You know how if a Muggle were to see Hogwarts, they would see rubble?” Christine asked. She motioned with her hand over everything in front of her. “Here everyone sees the same thing. Or maybe we see something less, since it was their technology that built this.”

Not knowing how to respond, Harry didn’t. Instead he stood beside this woman who ought to have been like a mother to him and felt out of place atop that old theatre. He was still trying to figure out his exact connection to Christine and Matt without being obvious about the fact that he didn’t know who they were or why they adopted him or why he’d never met them in his natural world. He didn’t want them thinking he was mad. It was all very confusing and it was what Harry focused on as the pair climbed down from their lofty position and then left the Colosseum.

“Thanks for taking care of Alana today,” Christine said as passed the Arch of Titus and entered the Roman Forum.

“She’s”—Harry tried to think of an appropriate word to describe how he felt about Alana and the virtual hero-worship she bestowed upon him—“small.”

“True.” Christine laughed. “It’s good to see you and Naomi are getting along too. You normally get exasperated and say ‘Come on, Naomi, say something. Give me something to work with!’ Then she replies by saying you really needed to learn the art of silence.”

“Er, she’s not that bad,” Harry said. Actually, she was probably the person on this trip that Harry liked best. She didn’t ask questions, didn’t talk to him like he ought to entertain her, and when Alana confused him, she took her off his hands.

They walked a bit further before Christine spotted an ice cream cart and hauled Harry over to it, insisting that they get some gelato. Christine started speaking rapidly in Italian to the man and Harry stared at her. Did she speak every language in the world? She had spoken French to the guards at the last checkpoint and then German to the next guard.

“What do you want, Harry?” she asked Harry in English. He looked at the options, pointing to two. Christine bought him the largest cone she could with two scoops of his chosen flavors. Christine and he happily ate their ice cream as they kept walking in what should have been the direction of the Floo Station.

“This is very good,” Harry said, enjoying his ice cream very much.

“It’s gelato, what did you expect?” Christine asked, walking up the hill that led to the forum.

“Dunno, just—” Harry cut himself off, thinking of the popsicle he’d gotten the day at the zoo with Dudley and Pierce and the lady that hadn’t realized he wasn’t meant to receive sweets. “I didn’t know you spoke Italian too.”

“Oh! I forgot that you’re underage.” She pulled out her wand and Harry instinctively dodged the spell she sent at him. She gave him a strange look. “Jumpy much?”

“It’s habit,” Harry said, shaken a bit. At least he had resisted the urge to grab his wand and stun her. That would have been awkward.

“Should I warn you first?”

Harry shrugged. “I suppose.”

“I’m going to cast a spell on you now,” Christine said, doing just that. Harry forced himself to let it hit him, knowing it could be a curse, but not knowing how to explain that he didn’t trust her when she seemed to think she had raised him. But after the spell hit, Harry was not itchy or missing a limb. Instead, something unexpected happened.

“I can understand them,” Harry said wonderingly.

“That was an Italian translation spell,” Christine said, putting her wand away and continuing the march as she ate her ice cream. Like speaking Parseltongue, speaking Italian sounded like English to Harry if he weren’t paying attention. Still Harry couldn’t help but have a thousand questions run across his mind about Christine and Matt in general. He decided to just ask them.

“Er, Christine,” he began, unsure how to word this, “do you ever—regret—well, taking me in?”

“No.” Christine took a lick out of her ice cream and walked on. She said it so easily, so quickly, so sincerely.

“You don’t regret adopting me?” Harry asked, sure that she had misheard his question.

“No,” Christine said casually again, looking around the forum.

“Not ever?” Harry pressed.

“No,” she answered without pause or a shred of doubt. She answered like she thought the question was inherently stupid. They walked around a large family taking a picture in front of a temple of some kind.

“Well, why did you adopt me in the first place?” Harry asked.

“Why wouldn’t I?” That was what Harry wanted to know: why wouldn’t Christine and Matt have taken him in back in his natural world?

“Are you my godmother?”

“No. I don’t think you have one of those. Your mum and dad were in already in hiding then, so only their secret keeper could go to your christening.” Harry felt a pang thinking about Sirius. “Besides, Matt and I were in hiding then too. It was right after his parents were attacked.” She mentioned it in a way that suggested that Harry should know about the attack on Matt’s parents, like it was something the family had discussed before. Deciding not to draw attention to his own lack of information, Harry went on with his line of questioning.

“And after my parents were attacked, you just came and collected me? Brought me home?”

“No, the Aurors found you, but when I heard about what happened, I went straight to the hospital and found you toddling around the daycare, stacking blocks. Then I picked you up and brought you home.” They stopped to look at the Temple to the Divine Faustina and Antinous Pius.

“And Dumbledore let you just take me without saying anything?” Harry asked disbelievingly after they had walked past the Vestal Virgin Temple.

“Nothing that mattered,” Christine said, smiling at him. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky as Harry and Christine continued their walk through the dusty old forum. The once-grand buildings were little more than rubble by this point, but they were still great enough to attract attention.

The holiday passed quickly in this fashion: the week spent at the villa or roaming about nearby villages and the weekend full of fun trips to famous cities with Matt and Christine. Harry’s birthday had been a special occasion, warranting a rare dinner out. It must be noted that the food at the restaurant was not as good as the House-elves’ food.

Christine had the entire restaurant sing to Harry. He was highly uncomfortable, though not nearly as uncomfortable as he was when they returned to London and the Stump August 25th, tired and sleepy. Harry could have slept until the next day, and that was his plan until Christine stopped him in the kitchen.

"Harry, I have an owl from the Daily Prophet," she said. He tensed. "They want to come with us to Diagon Alley."

"Are we going to Diagon Alley now?" Harry asked, confused.

Christine shook her head. "No."

"Then why did they—"

"They just want to follow you around whenever you decide to go and do a piece about you," Christine said, putting the letter down on the counter in front of Harry. He glanced at it but made no move to pick it up.

"Why?" he wanted to know.

"It'll be a year in mid-September," Christine said, riffling through the rest of the their letters. Matt came in right then.

"Since what?" Harry asked, worry creeping into his heart. How had that woman in Robert's bookshop known him?

Christine didn't reply, just looked pointedly at him and then at the letter. She had a vaguely sad look on her face that Harry didn't understand. In the weeks since he had been taken into her home and her family, he'd never seen her really display any emotion other than happiness and cheer. Harry shook his head, knowing it would be obvious that something was wrong if he didn't know what she was talking about now.

"It doesn't matter. Could you tell them that I'd rather they didn't come with us?" Harry asked.

"You sure, Harry?" Matt asked, looking at him curiously.

"Yes," Harry said.

"What about the first day of school?" Christine asked, picking the letter back up herself and skimming it.

"No," Harry said. "I don't want to be in the paper."

"They'll wonder what happened. It'll make them more curious," Matt said. Standing next to him, Christine looked at Harry for a long moment.

"I don't want to be in the paper," Harry repeated, pushing the letter toward the two of them.

"All right," Christine said, pulling out a new sheet of parchment and beginning to write. Harry nodded at her, satisfied, and headed up to bed.

August 31st, after a wonderful family dinner, Matt and Christine sent all the kids to bed, but asked that Harry stay. He looked at them, these people who acted like they were his parents, who hugged and kissed him good night and good morning, who made eggs and bacon without the help of house-elves, and who threw him his first real birthday party.

"Christine and I have been talking," Matt said, "and we've decided that it's time give you some things from your parents."

Harry said nothing.

"You're sixteen and old enough to take care of these things," Christine said, lifting a box off the ground and handing it to Harry. It always surprised him how sparingly she used magic to do menial tasks. Harry reached out and took the proffered box, bringing it to his lap where he opened it with curiosity. It was full of pictures and nick-knacks: a cat collar, a worn parchment note, a patrol schedule.

"I know you enjoy having your father's journal, and this was sort of like your mum's diary," Christine said. "She boxed away everything she loved. She'd have kept you in there, if she could have."

Taped to the side of the box was a key that Harry dislodged and held out.

"My Gringotts key?" he asked, looking at Matt and Christine.

"You recognized it," Christine said happily.

"See, I told you it was probably in there," Matt told Harry leaning over to poke around the box a bit. Harry remembered asking Matt where it was the first day he arrived.

"You've paid for everything all my life," Harry realized wonderingly. Who were these people? Who was he to them that they would adopt him so thoroughly, without even looking for compensation? Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon would surely have cleaned out his bank account if they had known it existed.

"We'll still pay for everything," Matt said, looking at him. "This isn't like we're kicking you out."

"We wanted to treat you like an adult and give you access to your inheritance," Christine said, sounding like she were reciting parts of an earlier conversation with Matt.

"I don't know how to—" Harry cut himself off and looked down at the key and then up at the beaming faces of Christine and then Matt. "Thank you."

"Thank us by continuing to make great marks," Matt said, standing and walking over to Harry, placing a fatherly hand on his shoulder and nodding at him in approval. Harry looked down at his hands. Even after eight weeks of it, Harry was not used to this physical attention from adults.

"You knew my mum, then," Harry said. Both Matt and Christine looked at him like he was crazy.

"Your mum was my best friend," Christine said.

"And a great friend to me," Matt said. "My last year at school, I lived just a few blocks from your grandparents. I thought you knew that."

Christine pulled her chair closer to Harry and began riffling through the pictures in the box. Matt sat on Harry's other side.

"Here we are!" Christine said, pulling a picture out of the pile. Harry looked at it. It was four girls holding up sheets of parchment, smiling and laughing. The pretty redhead on the left was also holding up four fingers on her other hand. "That's your mum, me, Matt's sister Tracy, and Samantha."

The last name was said with a bit of bitterness that Harry didn't understand, but instead of commenting on it, he merely said, "My mum's holding up four fingers."

"That's because she came in fourth in our Game again," Christine said. "She always came in last. I didn't understand how one person could be so bad at Defense."

"She looks happy," Harry noted. Now that he was seeing the photo, he could remember seeing Christine and the two other girls in some of the photos in the photo album Hagrid had given him his first year.

"She was," Christine said, smiling so sadly. Harry stared at the photo as his mother started to laugh and shake her head at the camera.

"Who took this photo?"

"Your dad," Christine said. "It was the morning after our last game at Hogwarts. Actually, hold on."

She went out of the room, probably in search of something, and left Harry and Matt staring at a photo of happy, laughing girls, and a box full of similar photos. Matt reached into the box and pulled out one of

him and Lily dancing. She was winking at the camera and then lifting her eyebrows suggestively at Matt.

“That’s from my wedding. Right before your mum and dad went into hiding. She was giving him a hard time, saying we ought to just run off and leave our spouses behind. Your dad cut in shortly after this photo.” Matt looked sad and Harry looked at the photo, pointing to a person in the background.

“That’s the same girl,” Harry said, pulling the other photo back out and lining them up.

“Yes, that’s Sam Caldwell.” Matt’s tone was short. “I don’t think we’ve spoken to her since this photo, actually.”

Harry looked questioningly at him.

“She married suspected Death Eaters and Christine was so angry that she stopped writing her,” Matt said.

“I’ve never seen Christine mad.”

Matt gave Harry a funny look. “How about when you were five and that reporter asked you in front of all those people how you felt about having Sirius Black for a godfather?”

Harry’s heart constricted. “Right.”

“She’s most often angry when people do stupid things for stupid reasons, and Sam marrying a suspected Death Eater and inviting others to her wedding just because she was scared struck Christine as very stupid.”

“A Death Eater named Caldwell?” Harry said aloud, trying to think of a Death Eater he knew by that name.

“That was her maiden name. She married the head of the Nott family,” Matt said, putting the photo back down and picking up one of Harry’s mum twirling underneath a large banner that read ‘Friendship Appreciation Day x 2.’ She looked very happy.

"Your mother was brilliant," Matt said quietly. Harry looked at him. "Never failed to make me laugh. I knew she'd be Head Girl before she did, though that's not saying much since even when she was Head Girl, she wasn't sure she deserved it. But she inspired respect with a single gesture and kept that respect with her skills and humility."

Harry stared at the spinning girl in the photo, the one who gave her life for him.

"She never thought she was a savior, never wanted to be," Matt continued, "but when push came to shove, she stepped up and saved a lot of people from heartache. I know you don't like to talk about them, but someday you will, and I want you to know that Christine and I'll always be here for that."

Harry may or may not have murmured a thank you as he stared at the pictures. Matt put down the photo and picked up one of Harry's dad with his mum, dancing in the autumn leaves. It was in his own photo album, the one Hagrid had given him and said was full of pictures from his parents' friends. Harry looked sharply over at Matt. It was probably the first piece of concrete evidence that Christine and Matt were connected to Harry's parents in both worlds.

"I didn't know your father very well," Matt said. "He and his friends were very self-contained."

"Hey!" Harry said, feeling miffed even if the memory of Snape's Pensieve kept him from feeling completely hostile.

"I'm not insulting him," Matt said, raising his eyebrows. "It's just that he and his four friends were all they ever seemed to need at school, though Lily came to be the thing he needed the most, and then you. Still, I'm allowed to be a little bitter. He flew better than anyone in my house, even if Gryffindor never won a cup while I was at school. Tracy knew him pretty well, though, because they were both on the Quidditch team."

“Here it is!” Christine said, walking into the dining room with a framed picture. She held it out for Harry to take, which he did. “I knew it was here somewhere. It was in our room! It’s my favorite picture.”

And it was Harry’s favorite too, after only a moment of looking at it. There were his dad and mum sitting on a bench next to Christine and Matt. Christine and Lily had their arms linked together, chatting. On the ground in front of them were two babies crawling after a quaffle. Soon, James leaned forward and picked up one of the babies as Matt picked up the other.

“That’s you and that’s Andrew,” Christine said, pointing. “It was after the Longbottoms were attacked and I wrote to Lily, telling her how to bypass our wards. She and James came the next day.”

“It looks like it was a great day,” Harry said distantly, staring at the picture.

Christine leaned her head on Matt’s shoulder. “True.”

Waking up and arrive at King’s Cross Station the next day was easy. The house-elves took all of the trunks ahead of them and then the whole family piled into a very interesting car that reminded Harry of the Ministry cars: it was very spacious on the inside and it seemed to cause entire buildings to move aside in order to let it pass. They arrived at the station to find three trolleys waiting for them: one for Andy, one for Stevie, and one for Harry with an unfamiliar owl on top of it.

The family pushed their trolleys through the divider and toward the train. A large group of adults shouting and taking photos caught Harry’s eye. Reporters. He turned away from them and tried not to be noticed.

“Looks like Neville’s keeping up his Going to School tradition,” Andy quipped. It took a moment for Harry to remember: that was right, here Neville was the famous one, the Boy Who Lived. Harry smiled in relief.

“You should go over and say hello, Harry. You’re practically his best friend.”

“I’ll say hi later,” Harry said, walking past the crowd and hearing snatches of conversation, feeling simultaneously relieved and curious about the fact that reporter in his natural world didn’t follow his life as closely as they followed Neville’s here.

“Why won’t you release your O.W.L. results, Neville?” a reporter called out.

“Don’t want to give the enemy more knowledge than they need, do I?” Neville replied, laughing. “Trust me, they’d be scared if they knew ‘em.” Harry did a double take. What? Was that Neville? That certainly didn’t sound like Neville. Nor did it particularly sound like a normal human being.

“Right, like ‘the enemy’ is going to attack Neville with all those bodyguards just because they know he failed his Potions O.W.L.,” Andy muttered. Harry smiled.

Neville was a good friend, but what was he talking about with this ‘enemy’ business? And what was with the reporters? Harry didn’t have reporters hounding his every move. He’d have hated that. And this business about bodyguards confused Harry as well. A shiver passed through Harry. Were things here really that horrible that they needed to constantly watch Neville?

“Oy, Potter!” called Neville. Harry looked over out of habit and flinched when the first flashbulb went off. He looked away and put his hand up to block the cameras.

“Hey, Neville,” Harry shouted back over the sudden flood of remarks from reporters. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Harry, why didn’t you want an article about you?” a reporter called out.

“Harry, look over here!” a photographer shouted.

“What does it feel like closing in on a year?” shouted a woman. The reporters and photographers kept calling out to him, but Harry turned and left without saying a word. If Rita Skeeter were still out there, it would be better to say nothing at all than excite that damnable quill of hers. So Harry climbed aboard the train, away from photographers and reporters, wondering why they were so interested in him here. Even back in his natural world, where he was The Boy Who Lived, reporters didn’t follow him around or hound him for information about his life.

“You look a little ill,” Matt noted as he levitated the three trunks into the same compartment. Harry shrugged. Christine looked at the three of them—Andy, Stevie, and Harry—and smiled.

“You lot are going to have so much fun this year,” she said, hugging them each in turn. When she arrived at Harry, she hugged him as she had the other two and Harry felt briefly very grateful for that, even if it was awkward to receive from a practical stranger.

“We’ll be up at Hogsmeade the first weekend in October, so stop by and we’ll have lunch, all right?” Matt said. Harry looked at him. Why would he be in Hogsmeade?

“He’s decided to start with the Hogsmeade store for the monthly inspections,” Christine explained, noting his look. Not that that clarified anything for him. He supposed it had something to do with what they did for a living. Whatever it was, it let both Christine and Matt taking weeks off during the summer for a vacation.

“Be good,” Matt said, eyes lingering on Harry. “I don’t want any notices about month-long detentions, all right?”

Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon barely cared if Harry lived or died (though he supposed the latter was what they hoped for), and here Matt McGrath felt like he could tell Harry to avoid detentions. It was a decidedly odd feeling to have someone else to report to. Harry wasn’t sure if he liked the feeling or not, though he thought he probably didn’t.

After Andy said he was going to find his friends and say hi, Stevie ran off in his own direction, and Harry was left to walk up and down the corridor trying to find a recognizable face. He felt odd, out of his element, and a bit like a first year. But when he heard a familiar laugh, he opened the compartment door and found a very welcome sight: Ron playing Exploding Snap with Seamus and Dean. Harry smiled and walked in.

“Hey, Harry, have fun in Italy?” Seamus used his teasing tone, but why would he tease Harry about vacationing in Italy?

“Yeah, it was brilliant,” Harry said, sitting beside Ron, who rolled his eyes.

“Of course it was brilliant,” Ron said, making a play. “We all knew it would be, but you just kept moaning about missing your birthday.”

“Well, I’m sure hanging out with Naomi Ryan was just brilliant too, eh?” Dean asked, laughing. Okay. That was confusing too. Naomi had actually been Harry’s favorite of the Ryan sisters. Plus, she was bloody beautiful.

“We got along well enough,” Harry said hesitantly. Christine had also mentioned that Harry and Naomi weren’t exactly best friends.

“I’m sure,” Seamus said sarcastically. Harry was beginning to wonder how exactly he and Naomi spent any time together. Most seemed to expect him to have hated spending time with her, many thought they would have tried to kill each other by the end of their time together.

Dean looked up at Harry. “Hey, are you back together with—”

“No, they’re not,” Ron interrupted him. Harry groaned. Why hadn’t he let Dean finish his sentence and name the mysterious girlfriend?

“How would you know?” Dean asked, raising his eyebrows at Ron.

“I saw her last week,” Ron said.

“Saw her, did you? How do you feel about that, Harry?” Seamus asked. Harry shrugged and said it was fine. Hell, he didn’t even know who this girl was. “Look at that! Harry doesn’t care. Maybe they’ve broken up for good this time.”

“Keeping dreaming, Seamus,” Dean said, putting down a card.

“There are other girls out there. I don’t have to dream of her being free,” Seamus said, winking.

“Sure, there are other girls,” Dean conceded mockingly, “but they’ve all dated Harry during one of the breaks from the steady.”

“There’s one he didn’t date,” Seamus said, winking at Ron, who glared at Seamus and told him it was his turn. Harry figured now was as good a time as any to confront Ron on whether or not he was the ‘one Harry trusted the most to keep his natural world a secret,’ the key to changing the world after he figured out who he wanted to replace him.

“Hey, Ron,” Harry began, deciding blunt confrontation was the best option, “you don’t happen to remember an alternative history do you?”

“What are you on about?” Ron asked without looking up as he made his move.

“You know, maybe you remember a different past. One where maybe my girlfriend and I never dated?” Harry asked. Ron’s lack of reaction apart from his verbal answer did not bode well for him being the secret keeper.

“Why are you so mad at her?” Ron asked. Harry knew that if Ron had known about the other world, he would have reacted differently, telling Harry everything. But that was part of the problem, Harry supposed, because hadn’t that bloke – Robert Whatever – said that the one who remembered would be the one Harry trusted most to tell no one? That wouldn’t be Ron, who Harry knew would tell Harry or Hermione almost immediately.

No, Ron was not the one Harry trusted most to keep the secret. He was the one Harry trusted most to be there for him. There was a difference between the two.

Stepping off the train into the rain, Harry followed Ron into a carriage.

"Harry!" called a female voice. Harry turned, but not spotting Hermione, he turned back to the carriage. It wasn't until after the thestral had started walking that he realized the girl who had been calling him might very well have been his girlfriend and not Hermione at all. He just wasn't used to any girls except Hermione seeking his company.

Climbing out of the carriages, Harry couldn't stop berating himself. He had been so close to identifying her.

"Mind your step," said a voice to his left. Harry looked up and saw the thestral in front of him and walked around it, turning to address the speaker, Luna Lovegood.

"I wasn't going to hit it," Harry said, oddly comforted by the presence of the fifth year girl who this time last year he would not have considered an acquaintance, much less a friend. But seeing her unnaturally large eyes, he was glad to see her unchanged between worlds, bottle-cap necklace and all.

"You see them," Luna said, her wide eyes staring at him. Harry realized he may have just messed up, but he shrugged and nodded. She kept looking at him. Harry began to wonder if he trusted Luna to keep the secret.

"Do you remember talking to me about the veil?" Harry asked, feeling vaguely uncomfortable bringing up this subject (it still hurt to think about the veil and what it meant), but knowing this was the easiest way to question her about his nature world.

She shook her head. "Should I?"

"No," Harry said, "I suppose not." No, Harry believed Luna would tell her theories to anyone. She wasn't right either. He looked at Luna and began walking with her up to the castle. He could see that other students were looking strangely at him, probably wondering why he was talking to Luna, but if Harry let public opinion rule his actions, he'd have slit his own throat the year before, if not second year.

Besides, even if she didn't know it and even if it hadn't happened in this world, Luna Lovegood had earned Harry respect and loyalty through a year of D.A. training and secret keeping, and by coming to save his godfather without thinking once of how dangerous it might have been for her. Yes, Harry knew what people thought about her, knew what they said about her, and he didn't care.

Neville walked past Harry as he was saying good-bye to Luna in the Great Hall and gave him a strange look.

"Hanging out with loonies now, Harry?" Neville asked, clapping Harry on the back and walking over to Gryffindor table. Harry watched him cross the room, waving at girls who stared at him, blowing kisses at one. Harry watched Neville trip as he tried to get into the seat and eat his meal, and then completely ignore a younger year who tried to help him up.

"Better check that glaring, Harry. Neville's head might explode," Andy said, walking up to Harry with Ginny Weasley beside him.

"Might not be that bad a thing to see Neville's head explode," Ginny said, smiling. Harry nodded, looking over at the pair of them.

"Let's find some seats," Andy said, nodding toward the table. Both Harry and Ginny agreed, walking over and sitting together. It was odd, not sitting with Ron (who was only a few seats away) or Hermione (who was at the other side of the table). Neville sat in the middle of the table, the focus of everyone, regaling them with stories of his summer. Harry tuned him out and found himself wishing for the old Neville.

Ginny and Andy proved to be great distractions from Neville's over-the-top antics, as did Seamus and Dean who sat down with them when they entered the Great Hall. Actually, a lot of people sat around them and a lot of people joined in their conversation. It was odd and a little uncomfortable for Harry. He was used to only ever having a small group of people around him.

Toward the end of the Welcoming Feast, someone tapped Harry on the shoulder. He turned to see Katie Bell standing behind him with a clipboard in hand. She looked the same: light brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, professional and friendly and kind all at once.

"Hello, Harry. How were your holidays?" Katie asked, smiling.

"They went well thanks," Harry said. "How were yours?"

"Busy. I made captain," Katie said, sighing but showing Harry the clipboard as if to prove that she was indeed Quidditch captain.

"That's great, Katie," Harry said, smiling and genuinely happy with the appointment. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Katie said. "I only wanted to tell you, Quidditch try-outs are tomorrow. I need you and Ginny there."

"Tomorrow? Before classes even begin?" Harry asked. The first of September had fallen on a Saturday this year.

"I thought it'd be best to have the team work together all year," Katie said. "Besides, we have a lot of positions to fill: two beaters, a chaser, and a keeper. I really hope these second years can pull it together in time, otherwise we won't have a shot at the Cup."

She left soon thereafter and Harry turned back to the group, locking eyes with Ginny and seeing her nod as if to tell him she had heard what Katie said. Harry nodded back at her.

"What was that all about?" Neville called down the table.

Harry looked back at him.

“Quidditch,” Ginny answered for him. Neville smiled and began to tell the table about the time he met the Chilean national Quidditch team. They’d wanted to meet the famous Neville Longbottom, he said, and Harry tuned him out again.

During the Feast, Harry had noticed some things about the people he knew: he noticed that Hermione and Ron did not eat together, noticed that Seamus and Dean were pretty much the same, noticed that Dumbledore also seemed unchanged. But then there were people like Ginny and Neville. Both of them had come to the Department of Mysteries and so Harry gave them the respect and loyalty he reserved for Ron, Hermione, and Luna. But this Ginny and Neville were barely recognizable as the same people as the D.A. members Harry had come to know in his world.

Chapter 3

Getting Back to Normal

Quidditch try-outs were the next bit of normality in Harry's life. Or he thought they would be. After having to listen to Neville tell story after story about something brave or fabulous or noteworthy that he had done over the holidays, Harry was thinking about transferring houses. Apparently, Neville had basically his own column in the Prophet and told Harry about it a lot.

So Harry was really looking forward to playing a bit of Quidditch, the one thing Harry truly enjoyed and was so glad to play again after the life-long ban Umbridge had given him. Or, he was looking forward to it until, when the would-be chasers mounted and kicked off, Katie suggested that Harry join them and judge them from the air, see how well he worked with them.

"You'll be able to tell if they'll be compatible with me too, won't you?" Katie asked. Harry looked at her.

"You too?" he asked.

"They're trying out to be the third chaser with you and me," Katie said, distracted as she watched the student mount their brooms and kick off.

"What? I play what?" Harry asked. Katie dragged her eyes away from the sky and looked at Harry.

"Chaser," Katie said, looking slightly worried.

"Oh, er," Harry muttered, holding his Firebolt in his left hand. "Do you think I could try out for seeker?"

Katie stared at Harry. "Ginny's the seeker."

"Could I try for reserve?"

Katie blinked. "Why?"

"I'm just not a very good chaser," Harry said, and it was true. He knew how to play all the positions—he had been on the team for five years—but seeker was the one he played best.

"You played for the English Junior National Team as chaser when you were fourteen," Katie said. What? Really? That was actually quite impressive. Still, Harry knew it wasn't the position for him.

"I'm not a chaser."

"But your dad was a chaser," Katie said.

"Right," Harry replied, not quite seeing the relevance, "but I'm not. Not really."

"I don't understand—what?" Katie looked confused.

He briefly considered explaining that he was from another world and was trying to figure out his place in this one, which included playing seeker, but decided against it and said, "I just want to try for seeker."

"Harry," Katie said, "I really need you to be a chaser. Otherwise, we'd need two chasers."

"Ginny's a great chaser." It was true, she'd played brilliantly the year before as both chaser and seeker.

"But Ginny's the seeker." This was obviously not going to work.

"I'll quit and try out again, if that'll make it easier," Harry said.

"No, no, don't quit. But if you try out and Ginny's a better seeker than you, will you play chaser again?" Katie asked, obviously trying for a compromise.

"Yes," Harry said. Ginny walked up then in all of her Gryffindor Quidditch gear, jaw set.

"How are they looking?" Ginny asked.

"They're looking fine," Katie said, obviously disturbed, "but Harry now wants to play seeker."

"But I'm seeker," Ginny said.

"I know," Harry said, "but I'm better at seeking than chasing."

Ginny smiled and gave him a hug, which was sort of awkward as she was holding her broom and it hit him twice. "Finally," Ginny said.

"Finally?" Katie asked.

"I've been trying to get Harry to switch places with me for years. He's built for seeking, even if it isn't as flashy as chasing," Ginny said, one arm still around Harry's middle, which made him uncomfortable though Ginny didn't seem to notice. Katie was frowning at the pair of them. Ginny extracted herself from Harry in order to mount her broom and kick off.

"Don't worry about it, Katie," Ginny said. "It'll be fine. Just find a chaser, two beaters, and a keeper like you planned. Harry and I'll work out the rest of it later."

"All right," Katie muttered, "but I don't understand why you two can't play the positions you've played for years."

Harry mounted and kicked off as well, flying with the chasers, watching and marking their strengths and weaknesses. Ginny, meanwhile, threw a Quaffle at him that he just barely caught. She moved so that they were flying side by side, reached out and took the Quaffle from him.

"You better keep up your reflexes, Harry," Ginny said, pulling into a spiral move in the air. "Or you'll never be able to save the world."

"I'm not going to save the world," Harry said, involuntarily remembering the prophecy he was trying to forget. "That's what we have Neville for."

“Neville?” Ginny repeated, laughing. “He’s not made to save us, Harry, no matter what scar he has on his forehead.”

“I hope you two are watching the tryouts!” Katie chimed up from the ground. Harry smiled. He didn’t think he’d ever heard Katie Bell raise her voice before. Maybe all those years playing for Wood had rubbed off on her a bit.

“Are you quite done being an idiot, Harry Potter?” asked Parvati Patil, marching straight at Harry the moment he arrived back in the common room after tryouts.

Harry was lost. “What?”

“Don’t you ‘What?’ me, Harry,” Parvati said, now standing in front of him and still being quite loud. “You didn’t write me at all. You didn’t even send a prank gift to me for my birthday.”

Then it clicked. Parvati was his on-again off-again girlfriend. Huh. That was odd.

“We’re broken up,” Harry said, taking quite a risk. If she weren’t his girlfriend and if they weren’t officially broken up, he imagined things would be difficult.

“We’re always broken up over the holidays,” Parvati said, acknowledging that she was the girlfriend. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It means I don’t have to stay in contact with you,” Harry said, fairly sure that this was true. Parvati’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re telling me you really want to break up with me? Forever?” Parvati asked.

Harry didn’t know if he wanted to break up with her forever, but he certainly didn’t want to date her. He had hated the Yule Ball and then

he'd only had to spend a few hours on a single date with her. And dating Cho Chang hadn't been a blast either.

"Right," Parvati said sarcastically, taking his silence to mean that he did want to break up. She walked forward, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him soundly. It was a possessive kiss and when Parvati backed away from him, she was smirking. "Let's just see how long you last without me."

Harry vaguely heard a noise behind him, where he knew Ginny was standing, and then the slamming of the Fat Lady's portrait. Without knowing quite why, Harry turned and followed her.

He found Ginny flying circles around the Quidditch field, cutting dangerously close to the posts. Watching her fly was amazing. Then she spotted him watching her and quit being amazing because she was obviously quite mad at him and very unwilling to have him see her fly.

"What are you doing standing around here?" Ginny asked, landing and stepping off her broom. "Don't you have to go make up with your girlfriend about now? It's been a full day since you arrived back at school."

"Where I come from, she's not my girlfriend," Harry said, deciding to check and see if Ginny was the one he trusted most with his secret.

"Where you come from? What sort of stupid joke is that?" Ginny asked. It didn't seem she was. He wondered briefly who he thought she might tell. Maybe her mum?

"A poor one, I suppose," Harry said. He saw a brief smile on her face before she was scowling again.

"Don't do this," Ginny said, throwing her broom into the shed and turning to walk away.

"Do what?" Harry asked, jogging after her.

"This!" Ginny said, turning to walk backward as she yelled and threw her hands out. "Any of this."

"I still don't understand."

"You wouldn't," she said spitefully, turning around to keep marching.

Harry stared after her, slowing to a stop. Here he was in a world with Parvati as his angry ex-girlfriend and a position as a chaser on the Gryffindor team, and now he was chasing after Ginny Weasley because she yelled at him when all along he knew this wasn't real, this world could change the moment he found his secret keeper. "This is so stupid."

Ginny wheeled around. "This is so stupid? This? What about you?"

"What about me?" Harry asked, completely surprised by her reaction.

"Why do you do this to yourself? To me? I'm your best friend, Harry, and I have been since you sat me down next to you my first day here. I'm the girl you come to when every other girl breaks your heart. I'm the one you tell when you feel like there's something missing in your life, like you ought to be making a bigger difference in the world. I'm the one you tell when you have fights with Matt or Christine. And you look at me like a joke, and tell me that when Alana grows up, you want her to be just like me. Do you have any idea how that makes me feel?"

"No, actually. I have absolutely no idea," Harry said defiantly. She was yelling at him for no reason.

"You think you're so clever," Ginny said. "When you kissed me last year and said you'd break up with her for good, I believed you. I'm such an idiot."

What? He had kissed Ginny? Told her he would break up with Parvati for her?

“Parvati and I are broken up,” Harry said, for lack of anything better to say.

“How long will that last, Harry?” Ginny asked over her shoulder. “A minute? An hour more maybe?”

“I don’t want to date her.” Not that he wanted to date Ginny either. She was— was— Ginny.

“I saw your face after she kissed you.”

“She kisses well,” Harry said. Ginny couldn’t blame him for enjoying that. On second thought, seeing her angry face, maybe she could. But why was he even trying to stay in her good graces? He didn’t want to date her. He didn’t want to date anyone. Dating Cho had been a mistake and he honestly didn’t think he’d be comfortable dating again for a while.

Ginny huffed and walked away. Harry let her go.

Entering his dorm room later that night, Harry felt very much like he did when his Aunt Marge visited: irritable, short-tempered, and ready to blow something up. That’s why it was so bloody wonderful to have Neville greet him the moment he opened the door.

“She’s bloody hot, mate. I don’t know why you enjoy screaming at her so much. I’d have shagged her long ago, but I’m very good with women. I’ll give you some advice,” Neville said, throwing open his curtains. Harry’s eyes narrowed. If it had been anyone else, if he hadn’t seen Neville’s grandmother in action, if Harry hadn’t been able to recite page twenty of his Quidditch Through the Ages in his head, he would have cursed Neville through a wall.

Harry walked past him. He changed quickly.

“I’d almost imagine you were gay if it weren’t for the stories,” Neville said. “Though I suppose those could have been—”

“Oh shut it, Neville,” Seamus said, coming out of the bathroom. “Everyone knows you’re just acting like a prat because Harry blew you off at the train station and the reporters couldn’t shut up about it and you’re jealous.”

“Why would I ever be jealous of him? The only reason they even care about Harry is because he’s my friend,” Neville said. “I’m the one on page one. Where’s Harry? Page four?”

“Right, when was the last time you helped Aurors—”

“Don’t be thick, Neville,” Harry said, interrupting Seamus without really listening to him. “The reporters don’t care about me at all, and I don’t want them to. So enjoy your front page news.”

“What, did someone slip you a Lying Drought?” Neville asked snidely. Why was everyone telling him what good friends he and Neville were supposed to be? Harry didn’t know that he could ever be a friend to this conceited version of his good mate. Harry didn’t even want to check to see if Neville remembered the other world. If Neville remembered the way he’d grown up, he would never have acted this way, no matter how this world treated him. But just to be safe:

“Hey, Neville, do you remember an alternate universe in which you weren’t such a prat?” Harry asked. Neville glared at him.

“You need to work on your insults, Harry. That was a little contrived,” Neville said. Harry got into bed, closed his curtains, and tried to fall asleep only to hear a loud tearing sound followed by Seamus’s taunting tone.

“Hey, Neville, breathe,” Seamus said. “That’s called being ignored.”

Breakfast in the morning was only strange because while Harry instinctively sat next to Ron, the redhead did not seem pleased by the arrangement. At least Andy sat next to Harry and they managed to talk as they had all summer until the schedules showed up. Harry looked at his in disbelief.

"I'm not in Defense," Harry said, though it was more a question than a statement.

"Course not," Andy said, looking his own schedule up and down.

"What do you mean? Why am I not in Defense but I'm still in Divination? What sort of O.W.L.s did I receive?" Harry asked, realizing for probably the first time that he didn't know the answer to that. Shouldn't he have received a letter about it?

"Shut it, you idiot," Andy said, turning to Harry. "Don't know why you're surprised. After your screaming fit last year, you knew you wouldn't have to take Defense ever again."

"Why wouldn't I want to take Defense?" Harry asked.

"I don't know. Maybe it's because you hate the professor," Andy said sarcastically. Then he looked around. "Say, why'd Ginny sitting all the way down there?"

Andy stood and walked down to talk to her, but Harry was busy looking at the Head Table, trying to spot the Defense professor that he hated. The only thing he knew was that the professor had to have been there for over a year if—Harry caught sight of him. It was a miracle and a great confusion. It was Remus Lupin, looking tired and drawn.

"Professor Lupin?" Harry whispered, just loud enough for Ron to hear.

"What?" Ron asked. "Still upset that your campaign to have him fired failed?"

"Fired? I'd never want him fired."

"That's right, dead would be preferable, wouldn't it?" Ron gave Harry a disgusted look before standing and walking away. Harry didn't understand. Why would Ron think Harry hated Remus? And if this world's Harry truly did hate Remus, why would that be? Harry looked up at the tired Remus Lupin and wondered if he wasn't the one Harry

trusted the most. He was loyal to Harry, wasn't he? And while he might tell Dumbledore or the Order, he wouldn't if Harry asked him not to. Yes, Harry needed to have a serious talk with Remus Lupin. But first he needed to send an owl to Christine and attend class.

"Morning, Harry," Neville said, sitting down.

"Morning," Harry said absentmindedly as he stood and walked toward the owlery to send a message to Christine.

After Divination with the still-batty Trelawney and the still-fuming-and-challenging Parvati, Harry made his way to Potions. Hermione sat in the back next to a Ravenclaw. Draco Malfoy sat in the front seat and Harry felt a surge of hatred as he looked at the pale boy and remembered the last time he's spoken to him in his natural world. He would have killed Malfoy if he could have. Harry took the closest open seat. It was next to Hannah Abbot, who looked at him and then quickly back to the front of the room.

Unconsciously, Harry was drawn to the members of the D.A. He had gotten to know them very well the previous year and they had proved themselves loyal. More than that, they trusted him.

Well, Hannah had thought Harry was the Heir of Slytherin, but she's apologized for that later. She'd cursed Malfoy on the train. That was enough for Harry.

"Today we will be studying the Strength Elixir, on page one-hundred and seventy of your texts," Professor Snape said. Harry didn't even realize he was glaring at Snape, hatred coursing through his veins, until the professor locked eyes with him and Harry felt himself accidentally using Legilimency.

Harry saw the professor's black eyes narrow in surprise and suspicion as he pushed Harry out of his mind and gave him a decidedly vengeful look. His eyes were black, cold, and empty.

“An essay on the properties of this potion’s ingredients will be due on Tuesday. Four feet,” Snape said, turning to the blackboard and beginning to write. At least, Harry knew, Snape would never be the one he trusted the most. Glaring at the back of his hate-filled, murdering, Death Eater head, Harry knew that Snape would likely tell both Dumbledore and Voldemort about the alternate world, just to save his own arse.

A quill dropped to Harry’s left and he saw that it was Neville’s, who sat in the middle with an empty seat next to him.

“Is our resident celebrity too good to take notes?” Snape asked. Harry wanted to break something over his head very badly. Even if he was insulting the stuffed up Neville, he was horrible.

Halfway through the class, Harry realized that it was odd for him to be in Potion’s class. It meant he had received an O on his O.W.L. He definitely wanted those results now.

“Realizing you don’t belong here, Mr. Potter?” Snape asked. Harry’s eyes narrowed as he looked up and met his gaze.

Harry said nothing in response. Instead he did little more than glare at the man he hated in front of him. Oddly, the whole class watched the exchange with something akin to horror on their faces. Harry hardly cared.

Later that night, heading back to the common room after another strange dinner with Andy, Ginny (who joined them though only talking to Andy), some other fifth years Harry didn’t know, Seamus, and Dean, Harry was struck by a sudden thought.

“What happened to the Philosopher’s Stone?” Harry asked.

“The what?” Andy asked.

“The Philosopher’s Stone. Flamel’s stone,” Harry said. Andy looked at him like he was crazy. Harry looked at Ginny, who was with them, if

still silent and she too shrugged at him, though it was a would-be-hostile-if-I-didn't-think-you-were-insane type of shrug.

“Who’s Flamel?”

“In my first year, the third floor corridor was off grounds—”

“Why would we know about that, Harry?” Ginny asked. “It was before we even got here.”

“But you should still know about it. Everyone knows about it.”

“Not everyone,” Andy said as Harry stopped outside the portrait of the Fat Lady. Andy and Ginny walked through.

Not everyone in this world knows about it, Harry thought. But everyone in his world knew. It was one of the Hogwarts legends, one of the things that every first year heard about, whispered in the back of History of Magic. It was part of the myth of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, the Untouchable Gryffindor Trio. But if the stone hadn't been saved, why wasn't Quirell working here? And what happened to the stone?

The next morning at breakfast, Harry sat next to Naomi, one of the few people who ever got up as early as Harry. Normally, he would have waited for Ron and Hermione before going to breakfast, but he had finally realized that in this world, hanging out with either of them was a bit too difficult: Hermione because he never saw her and Ron because he obviously disliked Harry. It was quite a bother.

Not that Naomi looked particularly happy to see him. She didn't look unhappy about it, just not as happy as, say, as some of his other friends might have been.

“Good morning, Harry,” Naomi said. He nodded at her and said good morning as well before tucking into some oatmeal. It was a long time before they spoke again.

"I heard Stephen made the team," Naomi said. Harry nodded.

"He was a brilliant beater," Harry said.

"Which is a backhanded compliment to yourself, no doubt, since you taught him to fly," Naomi said, eating a strawberry.

"No," Harry said, irritated by her hostile tone. "I'd never flown with him before tryouts."

Naomi put another fruit in her mouth and chewed slowly, finally swallowing and asking, "And you're playing seeker now?"

"Yes," Harry said, scooping all his oatmeal to one side of his bowl.

"How did that happen?" Naomi asked, eyeing the bowl.

"Ginny and I agreed to switch." Harry scraped the last of his oatmeal and stuck the overflowing spoon in his mouth.

"Did Katie?" Naomi asked carefully, as if Harry would simply ignore his captain.

"Not at first." Harry took a sip of his water.

"You took advantage of Katie, then," Naomi said, tapping her fingernail on the table.

"Katie's too nice to take advantage of," Harry said, putting down his glass and addressing Naomi directly since she seemed to want to fight. "It would be like kicking a puppy."

Naomi's eyes narrowed. "Kicking a puppy?"

"Muggle expression," Harry replied, used to having to answer this sort of bewildered look of Ron's whenever Harry said an expression that Ron thought was particularly cruel or strange.

He only realized his mistake when Naomi said, "You aren't in Muggle Studies."

“Hermione told me it.” That was, in general, one of the best excuses for knowledge.

“Hermione? Hermione Granger?” Naomi repeated.

“Yes,” Harry said defensively. Naomi didn’t respond quickly, but rather she stared thoughtfully at her fruit for a while and let silence encompass them both for a moment.

“You aren’t friends with Hermione Granger,” Naomi finally said.

“Well,” Harry said, “I eavesdrop on her a lot.”

Naomi’s eyes narrowed. “Right.”

Another pause in the conversation.

“Does Alana write you?” Naomi asked.

Harry was surprised by the turn in conversation. “No.”

“She said she’d write you today or tomorrow,” Naomi said. “Be sure to tell her about Stephen making the team.”

“Why don’t you tell her?” Harry asked, irritated.

Naomi looked at him and began to say something, but he never had the chance to hear the response because right then a group of his fellow sixth years piled around him. He wanted to leave, suddenly feeling claustrophobic. Naomi, he saw, left almost immediately. They hadn’t even said goodbye, but when he caught her eye, they both nodded, acknowledging the fact that neither wanted to be at that table right then. And then she was gone.

“Were you just talking to Naomi Ryan?” Dean asked, sitting beside Harry, who shrugged.

“Better watch out for Duncan. You know he doesn’t like other blokes talking to her,” Seamus said. Who was Duncan?

"Are they dating?" Harry asked.

"No," Seamus said, "but you know how he is."

"And you know, Seamus, that he wouldn't mind Harry talking to her. He's been friends with her since birth practically," Dean said, tossing a roll at his friend. "Plus, Duncan and Harry know each other well enough."

"Which is unfair. Why does everyone like him?" Seamus asked, smiling to show that he was joking about being angry about it. Harry felt uncomfortable.

That night, of course, was the night Naomi Ryan was found Petrified on the second floor.

A/N: Hey! One day until HPB! AHHHHH! I'm SOOO excited. I'm sure there are typos here. You just sort of have to deal with that, okay? YAY FOR HPB! Hope you enjoyed this chapter. The next one will be up after I've finished eh book and reveled in it for a while. AHHHHH! I'm SO excited. Go to my livejournal (if you have any questions or feel free to im me at loudscaryredhead. Mind that I live in Hawaii and am thus possible twelve hours behind you in reading the sixth book. Besides that, feel free to contact me! Miranda

Chapter 4

An Old Friend's Help

The commotion caused by Naomi Ryan's petrification shocked the school. Students were immediately ushered into their common rooms and told by the prefects to wait around for answers. The students weren't even really gossiping or whispering. Instead, they were sitting around looking stupefied themselves. Harry thought they looked ridiculous. As he walked right up to and out of the portrait hole after hearing the news, he spared a glance at Ron and Hermione, to whom he desperately wished to talk. Together, the three of them had figured this thing out the first time.

"Harry, where do you think you're going?" Ginny asked, running after him as he walked down the corridor.

"The staffroom," Harry said without glancing back at her.

"Oh, don't wait for me or anything," Ginny called out as she caught up with him and matched his pace. Harry didn't care if she was with him or not. All he cared about was getting to that room. That was all he had cared about since he heard the news moments before.

The staircases seemed to understand and agree with his purpose as they detached from the walls and moved him along a faster, shorter path. But that was stupid. It wasn't as if the castle were alive.

"What are you going to tell the professors?" Ginny asked.

"That I know how the Chamber was opened and I know where it is," Harry said truthfully as the staircase dropped three floors and brought him right in front of the staff room.

"Don't be thick, Harry. The Chamber's a myth," Ginny said. Harry didn't respond, instead he knocked on the staffroom door and ignored the stone gargoyles on either side of the door that challenged him. When Sprout opened the door, she looked displeased to see Harry and Ginny.

“Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley, what are you doing here?” she asked. “The students were told to stay in their common rooms.”

Harry nodded at her and then walked into the room anyway.

“Isn’t it obvious, Pomona, that Potter wants more attention now that the year-mark is coming up?” Snape asked. “Maybe he wants to get himself killed and back in the news--”

“Shut up!” Harry yelled, suddenly overwhelmed by his hatred for the man. Snape looked surprised and then like he wanted to kill Harry.

“I am a professor, Potter—”

“The Chamber is open and if nothing’s done about it, it will kill students soon,” Harry said. Ginny, beside Harry, looked torn between believing him and wanting to knock him upside the head and drag him out of the room while apologizing to the professors.

“What Chamber?” Remus Lupin asked. It was strangely comforting to see him, Harry realized.

“The Chamber of Secrets,” Harry replied, not letting himself become caught up in memories of a man who was little more than a stranger in his own world, let alone here.

“The Chamber of Secrets is a myth, Potter,” Snape said. Harry felt once again ready to be overwhelmed by his hatred, but pushed it aside.

“You’re telling me that when you found Naomi’s body there wasn’t a message about the Chamber being opened?” Harry asked.

The professors and Ginny stared at him. Ginny because she thought he’d gone round the bend. The professors for a very different reason.

“How did you know about that?” Lupin asked. “Professor McGonagall found Naomi and covered the message immediately before ordering the students to their common rooms. Have you gone there?”

Harry looked at him. "I came right here after learning what happened."

"It's true, professor. I've been with him the whole time," Ginny said, looking uncertain.

"How do you know about it, Potter?" Snape asked and Harry could feel the probing of his Legilimency. Memories came to mind quickly, starting with the most recent: playing Quidditch, kissing Parvati, going to Rome, sitting on a tour bus, eating ice cream with Christine--

"No," Harry breathed out, pushing Snape out of his mind so forcefully that it felt like shoving him. "Those are mine."

"Excuse me, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked, clearly unnerved again.

This time Harry walked forward until he was literally too close to Snape for comfort. "This isn't a righteous hatred I'm feeling. It would kill you if I let it."

"The Chamber, Mr. Potter. What about the Chamber?" Remus asked.

Harry looked away from the Potions Master and into the eyes of the werewolf, his father's best friend. "There's a diary. Voldemort made it when he was sixteen years old and captured his own—"

"You-Know-Who's here, in the castle?" Sprout asked, looking left and right as if Voldemort might be there. The other professors all looked similarly shaken by Harry's use of the name. That irritated Harry. A lot.

"No," Snape said scathingly, though his face was pale, drawn, and etched with fury. "Potter has lost his mind to think that the Chamber was opened by him."

"Not him," Harry said, enunciating clearly and wanting to curse the man. How could these people ignore the truth so obviously right in front of them? Harry wished Dumbledore were there. He had expected the Headmaster to be there. Where was he? "The Chamber was opened by a student who was briefly possessed by the memory

of Voldemort's sixteen year old self, trapped in a diary here. The Malfoys had it. They must have given it to someone. It made its way to Hogwarts somehow, and now that essence is taking over a student, little by little."

"He's obviously delusional and out to ruin the reputation of one of my students," Snape said. Harry could have hexed him then for being so bias, for being so blind, for being so... so... Snape-like.

"It wasn't Draco and it probably wasn't a Slytherin," Harry said, just barely keeping himself from saying 'last time it was Ginny.' "It could be anyone. They won't know they did it. They'll have blank spots in their memory, missing hours."

"All very convincing, Potter, but where is this supposed diary?" Snape asked.

"Weren't you listening? I don't know! You have to find the student with a blank memory!" Harry said.

"And once we do?" Hooch asked.

"Drive a knife or something through the pages of the book." Harry wasn't sure the knife was needed, but that's what worked for him and he wasn't about to change the tried and true method.

"And until then we can only wait and watch the Heir attack?"

"It's not the Heir. Not really. It's a student being used by the memory of--"

Snape cut him off. "Are we honestly sitting here listening to this attention-seeking—"

"Find the diary!" Harry screamed. The room went silent. Every pair of eyes was staring at Harry as if he'd never yelled before in his life, as if they couldn't believe he cared this much and was so convinced.

"Do you know where the Chamber is, Mr. Potter?" Flitwick asked. Harry nodded.

“Moaning Myrtle’s Loo.”

They stared. The boy really was crazy.

“Get Neville, he’s the only one who can open it,” Harry said, feeling a brief pang of guilt for forcing Neville to do this work. He wished he could spare his friend. At least he wouldn’t have to fight the Basilisk, though. “Get him to speak Parseltongue to the sink with the little snake picture—”

“The Boy-Who-Lived does not speak Parseltongue,” Professor Sinistra exclaimed.

“Have you ever asked him to try?” Harry asked.

Trelawney looked somehow happy as she said, “I’ve always thought Mr. Longbottom possessed the skills of the Snake. If you’ll remember, I even said so when he first—”

“Just get Neville, get a rooster, bring your wands, and go to the damn loo!” Harry yelled. Why did this have to be so difficult? Why didn’t they believe him? It had almost been easier to just go with Ron into the Chamber alone, as terrifying as that had been, than convince this lot to do the same.

“We are professors, Harry, and we deserve some respect,” Remus said. Harry looked around, so frustrated that he wanted to scream. Where was McGonagall? Where was Dumbledore? They would do something or at least seem to respect his opinion. Why was Remus being so difficult?

“Please, just get Dumbledore and go to the loo. He can handle the Basilisk. You can find the student later. Destroy the diary later,” Harry said.

“There’s a Basilisk in the Chamber?” Trelawney asked, smile fleeing from her face.

“That’s what petrified Naomi. It could have killed her”—Harry’s heart hurt at the thought—“But she must have been looking through something so that she was only petrified, maybe a camera or a puddle of water or something. Or she looked around corners with mirrors,” Harry said, remembering Hermione’s precaution.

“How do you know all about this?” Flitwick asked, stepping forward. Harry looked at his small Charms professor and could not think of a fast enough lie. All he could think about was Naomi taking Alana into her lap on that tour bus in Rome. He remembered seeing Hermione lying petrified in the Hospital Wing. And then he remembered with almost scary clarity facing the sixteen year old Tom Riddle. He remembered standing over Ginny Weasley’s body, a giant snake slithering out of the mouth of Salazar Slytherin’s statue. He remembered what it was to be so close to death-- poison seeping through his body-- until Fawkes cried for him.

It wasn’t until that moment that Harry realized Snape was staring at him. Harry quickly looked away and tried to think of something else.

“Well, how do you know about all this?” asked Professor Sinistra.

Harry looked at her and said the first thing that came to mind: “Tom Riddle told me.”

“And who is that?” Flitwick asked.

“He certainly isn’t a student.”

“He’s someone I happened to meet,” Harry said, rushing through this explanation. “It hardly matters. What matters is that the Chamber must be destroyed!”

Even though Harry repeated the same story again and again, even though they could have tested his theory easily by calling Neville down and just having him talk, the professors did nothing but talk more and ask more questions. Finally Harry gave up on them, turned and almost left the room, deciding to go straight to the Headmaster’s office. But he did not need to go to that office because Headmaster

Dumbledore walked into the staffroom at that moment. Harry practically sighed in relief. Here was a man who would believe Harry.

“Mr. Potter, I believe you and Miss Weasley were told to stay in your common room,” the Headmaster said. Harry started slightly. He’d forgotten Ginny was with him. But it made a sick sort of sense for her to be there with him as he faced the Chamber again.

“I know, Headmaster, but—”

“This isn’t a matter to be taken lightly, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said again and there was something different about the way he spoke to Harry that the boy couldn’t quite understand. Harry ignored that thought.

“Headmaster, Mr. Potter claims to know how the Chamber was opened,” Sinistra said, launching into a repetition of Harry’s exact suggestions and claims. After the Arithmancy professor concluded, Dumbledore looked at Harry.

“And how did you come to your information, Mr. Potter?” Dumbledore asked.

Before Harry could open his mouth, Flitwick said, “He claims a boy named Tom Riddle told him.”

Harry cursed under his breath as he saw the Headmaster’s eyes sharpen.

“You know Tom Riddle personally?” Dumbledore asked.

“No, not personally,” Harry said. “Well, sort of personally. I mean, he tried to kill me—”

“You’re trusting the word of someone who tried to murder you?” Hooch asked.

“Well, he was still very convincing,” Harry said, trying so desperately to make them understand that he was speaking the truth. Why didn’t they believe him? Why would he lie about something like this?

“Mr. Potter, I must stress the real danger of this situation. This is no time for joking or—”

“I know, Headmaster. I do,” Harry said. “Please, just send for Neville and have him talk to the sink. There’ll be a tunnel you can take into the Chamber, where you’ll find the Basilisk.”

“And of the Heir?”

“He only exists as a memory in a diary he created when he was sixteen years old. You can find and destroy that easily enough after you take care of the Basilisk,” Harry said.

“By finding the student with blank memory spots?”

“Yes.”

Professor Dumbledore watched Harry for a long while before agreeing to send for Neville. Harry almost jumped for joy, knowing the Headmaster would do something productive.

It took almost four more hours to get Neville, find a rooster (they had all been killed, Hagrid explained when asked why he had to go into Hogsmeade to retrieve one), assemble the professors at the loo and have Neville speak halting English to the sink.

“Er, open up, sink,” Neville said, glancing at the assorted professors (and Harry and Ginny) behind him. “Please?”

Snape rolled his eyes and turned to the headmaster. “It is absurd that we are even testing this idiotic—”

“Severus,” Dumbledore said, cutting him off. Then he turned to Harry.

Harry stepped forward and started whispering to Neville so as to avoid being overheard and interrupted. “Neville, look at the snake

etched into the faucet. Focus on it and nothing else. Pretend it's alive. Imagine it moving. Then ask the sink to open."

Neville looked at Harry like he was crazy. "Why?"

No one had felt it necessary to inform Neville that he was going to be attempting Parseltongue. The idea that it was an evil (not to mention impossible) task, they decided, might hinder his ability to actually perform.

"Come on, Neville, just trust me," Harry said and Neville gave him a funny look before focusing once again on the sink. He stared at it for a good minute before speaking.

"Open," he said again. Harry groaned and put his head in his hands. Why couldn't Neville do this? Harry had been able to. But, Harry realized, that was only after he'd known he could speak the language.

The professors broke out in whispers, obviously content to know that they been right all along: Harry had been wrong about this entire endeavor. They wondered what they were going to do now.

Harry looked over at Professor Snape, though he was loath to do so.

"Do you think you could perform the Serpensortia spell?"

As he had a lot over the past few days, the Potions Master looked unsettled by Harry's words. "What do you know of that spell?"

"We need a real snake," Harry said, indicating the confused Neville with his head.

"I doubt Longbottom could even look at a snake without fainting," Snape said. Dumbledore, meanwhile, conjured a small snake and held it out to Harry, giving him a very penetrating look as he did so. Harry took the snake and the look in stride. There was time later to think about the headmaster's opinion of him.

"Neville, say hello to this snake," Harry said.

“What?”

“Just say hello without thinking,” Ginny said, stepping up. Neville rolled his eyes, but said hello. Only, it wasn’t exactly the hello that everyone save Harry had been expecting. Instead, it was a long run of hisses: Parseltongue. There wasn’t a sound made after Neville stopped talking and rolled his eyes at Harry.

“Anything else you’d like me to do, Harry? Maybe breathe or something equally simple?” Neville asked.

Harry moved the snake so that it wrapped around the faucet. “Ask the sink to open while talking to the snake.”

“What? No. That’s ridiculous,” Neville said, turning to appeal to the professors for intervention. “You can’t honestly want me to keep talking to things, can you? I know I’m the Boy Who Lived, but my voice can’t be that special, can it?”

“Just do as he says, Longbottom,” Snape said. And now he really looked unsettled. Actually, all the professors did. Most of them also looked pale and confused. Only Dumbledore looked calm as he regarded Neville. McGonagall looked like she was trying not to ask all of the many questions that she had.

“Fine,” Neville muttered, seeing that everyone in the room was waiting for him to speak. He turned to the snake and began hissing. And the entire sink folded in on itself, sounds of shifting metal and scraping rusted pipes filled the loo. And then they all stood staring at the slimy opening to the Chamber.

Harry looked first at the opening and then over at the professors assembled. Most were alternatively looking at Neville and then the opening. McGonagall was looking at the opening and then at Dumbledore. The Headmaster was looking at Neville. Snape was glaring daggers at Harry, who met his gaze only briefly. Ginny was staring with open curiosity at the sink. Neville looked completely dumbfounded.

"I mean, I knew I was important, but to be able to open a secret room in Hogwarts? That's brilliant," he said. "And I'm sure you've all tried, so that means that only I could do it. I could do something none of you—"

"Professor McGonagall, please escort your students to their dormitories and then return here," Dumbledore said.

"Sir, we can't go yet," Harry said, dreading having to explain this next part. "There might be a few doors down there that need to be opened with Parseltongue."

"There might be?" Snape repeated.

"Yes," Harry said, eyes narrowing at the suspicion in Snape's voice, "there might be."

"If that's the case, only Mr. Longbottom would need to remain," McGonagall said, placing a hand on Harry's and Ginny's shoulders and turning to have them leave. But Harry refused to take a step away from that sink and the Chamber. It felt wrong to just leave the hard part for someone else. It felt wrong to just abandon them all.

"Perhaps Mr. Potter ought to stay," Trelawney said. Everyone turned to look at her, surprised. "He seems to have tapped into his inner eye with regards to this situation. His knowledge could be useful."

The professors regarded Harry.

"If Harry's staying, then I am too," Ginny said. That surprised Harry a bit too, but then he remembered that Ginny was his best mate in this world. And he remembered that this Ginny didn't have memories of this Chamber and of the young Tom Riddle. And as he had thought before, it somehow felt appropriate to be there with Ginny.

"I will not have students put in unnecessary danger," Dumbledore said. But after a long discussion and a purposeful arrangement of order, Professors Dumbledore, Snape, and Lupin went into the Chamber with Neville.

Something about this arrangement felt deeply wrong to Harry even though it was the reason he came here: to be the one that didn't have to go into the Chamber.

"Just say open to any doors you encounter," Harry said in a rush to Neville right before he went boastingly into the opening. "Picture a snake and pretend you're talking to him and just say open. And never look at the Basilisk. It might come out of the mouth of a statue of Slytherin. Just—"

"Go, Longbottom." Snape glared at Harry even as he addressed Neville. Dumbledore was the first to go into the Chamber with a rooster, then Remus with his own rooster, then the pompously proud and gloating Neville, and finally Snape. Harry's nerves were fried. Watching them go, knowing he couldn't help them, was one of the worst feelings he had ever experienced.

Maybe Hermione was right. Maybe he did have a hero complex.

Or maybe he just didn't trust other people to be as lucky as he had been.

Ginny took his hand in hers as McGonagall sent them back to their common room with Trelawney, but Harry found little comfort in the awkward handholding with a girl who he only knew through the DA. He looked down at the slight redhead, who looked back up at him. Trelawney was a few steps ahead of them, babbling about Harry's inner eye.

"How did you know about all of that?" Ginny asked, her brown eyes wide and innocent and sparkling with interest and curiosity. Harry could do little more than stare at her with a stark sadness and realize that he knew nothing about this world. He hadn't even known that the Chamber hadn't been opened. He didn't know who his best friends were or why Snape looked confused by his blatantly angry remarks.

He needed answers.

So he decided to talk to the one person he knew who always had answers.

He found her sitting in the library, alone, studying.

"Hello, Hermione," Harry said, sitting next to her. She looked up, startled, and pulled her books slightly away. Harry cringed. Okay, so they obviously weren't best friends in this world.

"Do you need help with something?" Hermione asked. Yep, that was her guarded-and-annoyed tone. Harry was not going to be doing well here.

"Any chance you remember an alternate history, one in which I'm the Boy Who Lived?" Harry asked, hoping against hope that he was wrong and that Hermione was the one he trusted the most.

"What?" Hermione repeated.

"Well, do you?"

"No, of course not. What a stupid question," Hermione said.

"I figured as much," Harry muttered, leaning back in the chair. It would have been convenient if Hermione were the one who remembered, but Harry knew she'd have probably come immediately to Ron or him if she had remembered something. Well, that was all right, he would just convince her.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione asked, frustrated.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked. "We were told to report to our common rooms. Imagine my surprise when I asked someone where you were and they said you'd left a while ago."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Why should I have stayed there? To hide from that stupid prank?"

"It wasn't a prank," Harry said, surprised that she could have thought so. "Naomi's been petrified."

"That's what people keep saying, but have you actually seen her?" Hermione asked, sounding annoyingly sure of herself. Harry hadn't heard that tone from her since first year. "Rumors at Hogwarts need to be taken with a grain of salt. Like that business first year with there supposedly being a dragon on grounds."

Harry stared. "Hermione, this isn't a rumor."

"Prove it," she said, turning back to her book and ignoring him. Harry felt a pang of loss that he couldn't quite understand. Where was his best friend? The one who hexed Marietta last year?

"Listen, I don't really care if you believe this is happening or not. It is, but Dumbledore's handling it and I need some answers to other questions."

"So you want me to do your homework," Hermione said.

"No," Harry said, involuntarily remembering how nice it was when Hermione checked over his essays and helped him find the right direction. "I'm not the Harry Potter you know. I come from an alternate reality in which we're best friends."

"This must be the stupidest prank I've ever heard of." Hermione began to pack up her things. That was no good. Harry grabbed her hand to keep her from doing anything and found a wand pointed at him. Being at the wrong end of Hermione's wand was never a dream of his. He let her go and raised his hands.

"Okay. No touching. I get it," Harry said.

"Get away from me," Hermione said.

"Hermione, listen to me," Harry said. Hermione jabbed forward with her wand, shooting him a challenging look. "What do you know about me?"

"Aside from the fact that you're one of the most self absorbed, egotistic people I've ever met?" Hermione asked. Harry winced.

Hearing those words from Snape was different, easy to ignore and write off as Snape being unfair. Coming from Hermione it felt like a painful truth. What was his other self like?

"I was raised in the magical world right?" Harry prompted.

"If you say so."

"You don't know that?"

Hermione shrugged, still not lowering her wand. "I might. What of it?"

"I haven't taken Muggle Studies, right?"

"What does this matter?"

"Just answer. Have I taken that class?"

"No." She was trying not to roll her eyes, Harry knew.

"But I know everything about Muggles," Harry said.

"Is that supposed to impress me?"

"Impress you?" Harry repeated, feeling like tearing out his hair. "No, it's not meant to bloody impress you. It's meant to let you see that I'm a different person. I know different things. I'm not the Harry you know."

"You're not making any sense," Hermione said, not sounding like she particularly cared. Harry didn't think he ever missed his best friend more than at that moment.

"Hermione, ask me something—anything—that you know I shouldn't know about the Muggle world or your life and I'll be able to answer it."

"How does electricity work?" she asked in an offhand tone.

“Bloody hell, I don’t know that,” Harry said. “I flip a switch to turn on lights and make sure that the everything’s plugged in but that’s about—”

“Sure,” Hermione said, shaking her head, lowering her wand, and finishing with her packing. She started to stand and walk away. Harry stood and followed her.

“What can I say that would convince you I’m from an alternate reality?”

“There’s nothing you can say that would convince me,” Hermione finally said, continuing to walk away. Harry looked at her, angry and frustrated. How could she not know? Then he got an idea.

“Your boggart!” Harry called out. Hermione turned around. Madam Pince glared at Harry, so he moved closer to Hermione and spoke more quietly.

“What about it?” Hermione asked.

“Do I know what it is?” Harry whispered.

“No,” she said uncertainly.

“Does anyone? Would there be an real reason you can think of why I would know what your boggart is?” Harry asked. Hermione shook her head and Harry walked toward her until they were as close as before. “If I knew what it was, would that convince you?”

“I don’t know what you’re playing at Harry,” Hermione said. “You could probably guess it anyway.”

“All right, in third year, it was McGonagall standing in front of you, holding a stack of books, telling you that you failed all of your classes,” Harry said. He saw Hermione go pale. This was his opportunity. What else could he say to convince her? Oh! “Also in third year, McGonagall got authorization for you to use a Time-Turner to get to all of your classes on time. You didn’t tell anyone about it.”

“What sort of stupid game is this?” Hermione asked, angry. “How did you know about those things? Did you bug me or something? I don’t keep a diary.”

“No, you don’t,” Harry said, on a roll now. “I knew that about you. It’s because your cousin read it when you were eight or something and teased you about a boy you liked. Brian or something. Your favorite book is Hogwarts, A History, and oh! People can’t Apparate or Disapparate from Hogwarts grounds.”

“What’s that have to do with me?”

“Well, it’s just something you’re always telling Ron and me,” Harry said, seeing that he’d gotten her attention now.

Hermione looked almost convinced, ready to say something, then she shook her head. “No, no, I don’t believe you. You’re trying to trick me or something. Or get into the papers again.”

“I don’t want to be in the papers and I don’t want to trick you,” Harry said. “I’d never try to trick you unless it was to break a rule or if it was about Quidditch.”

“I don’t care what you say. I don’t believe you.”

“Then why did I understand what you meant when you asked if I’d bugged you?” Harry asked. “And how could I know about the time turner? And how could I know about your boggart? Oh, and your Patronus is an otter!”

“I don’t have a Patronus,” Hermione said, taking a step away from him and sitting on a chair nearby.

“You don’t? Well, when you do, it’ll be an otter,” Harry said, stepping forward and taking the seat beside her. “And I’m not from this world, but in my world, you’re one of two people in the world I would trust with my life. You helped me attack a troll and lied to McGonagall about it. You figured out that it was a basilisk in the Chamber and you even made the Polyjuice Potion in second year—”

“That’s impossible. It would take—”

“Months?” Harry asked. “And a lot of ingredients that we couldn’t get? I know. You figured it out though and Ron and I stole from Snape’s store of ingredients.”

“Why?”

“So that we could figure out who the Heir of Slytherin was,” Harry said, eyes glowing with remembrance. “You, me, and Ron did all sorts of things like that.”

Hermione opened her mouth, shut it, and then turned to look at the table for a long while.

“Do you believe me?” Harry asked.

“Why are you trying to convince me?” Hermione replied, looking up at him. “Why do you care if I believe you?”

“Because I need answers,” Harry said again. “I need to know more about this world. I need to know who to trust. I need to know why you couldn’t believe something like the Chamber would happen.”

Hermione continued to regard him. “Why me?”

“Because I trust you to tell me the truth,” Harry said. And a long moment passed between them, both staring at the other.

“I don’t trust you,” Hermione said. It hurt to hear. Hurt more than Harry was willing to admit. “And I don’t believe you.”

“Come on, Hermione. You aren’t stupid. Haven’t I been acting strangely lately? Or, at least differently? Haven’t I done anything out of character?”

“Beside talking to me?” Hermione asked, but she appeared to be thinking about it. “I suppose you have been acting differently. Slightly. Not enough to make me even consider this farfetched switching universe explanation, but slightly.”

“How?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because,” Harry said, “I need to find the person I trust to go into the Chamber in my place and the person I trust most to keep the secret of my world. So I have to start fitting in here if I want to understand who my real friends are.”

“How did you come here?” Hermione asked. Harry told her, the whole thing about asking that someone else switch places with him and Robert appearing at the park. He left out some very key points: the prophecy, the fight at the ministry, Sirius. Hermione’s shrewd look, however, suggested that she knew he was leaving some explanations out.

Hermione, still looking at him like he was an Arithmancy problem instead of a person, finally said, “What would you like to know, then?”

Author’s Notes: hope you all enjoyed this. I hope to post the rest of this relatively quickly. As always, go to the livejournal if you have any questions. Sorry about the typos, I’ll go over the last two chapters and fix those as quickly as possible.

Chapter 5

The Lists

Neville's big return from the Chamber became the thing of Hogwarts legend almost immediately. Of course, he reveled in the spotlight as long as he could, basking in the glory of answering questions from over-awed seventh years and nervous-looking first years. He sat at breakfast the next day all but glowing with self-righteous pomp. He told and retold the story of the daring adventure into the Chamber. He conveniently left out any details that might have glorified anyone else, even Dumbledore or the other professors.

But, as it always seemed to, Hogwarts would not let his be the only version of the story told. Oh no, there were rumors any and everywhere a person cared to check: portraits, clusters of Ravenclaws, and even (though maybe most importantly) Moaning Myrtle. There were theories that Neville had opened the Chamber himself, which Harry had expected, and there were rumors that the professors had been trying to protect Naomi from something through this elaborate hoax.

Harry ignored it all, having heard worse before, and instead decided to focus on Hermione and the information she was willingly giving him throughout the meal.

"So you don't know anything about the philosopher's stone?" Harry asked, confused.

She shook her head. "I've never heard of it."

"So what? One day you were just able to visit the third floor corridor again?" Harry asked. Hermione nodded. Harry had told her his version of their first year and, to her credit, she had her own reservations about the tale.

"I still don't understand how three first years could bypass Hogwarts' greatest defenses," she said again. Harry couldn't explain that bit himself. The more years that passed since first year, the less Harry could really believe he and his friends had been so stupid. The first

years looked so small to him now. The idea that three of them could take on those protection spells seemed absurd. But Harry, Ron, and Hermione had always been able to do extraordinary things together, hadn't they?

Harry glanced around the Great Hall, more out of habit than actual curiosity, only to see Snape considering him closely. Glaring, sure, but not with his normal level of hatred. Harry narrowed his eyes and looked further down the staff table, only to find many of them considering at him. But most disturbing was Remus Lupin's look.

"As soon as I'm done with breakfast, I'm talking to Professor Lupin and asking to be put in N.E.W.T. level Defense," Harry said, deciding that he needed to do something to rectify his relationship with Lupin.

"But you hate him!" Hermione said.

"I do not," Harry replied, looking at her. "He was one of my father's best friends."

The owls arrived then, delivering the morning mail. That strange not-Hedwig owl dropped three letters into Harry's lap, which he barely glanced at before the front page of Hermione's Daily Prophet caught his attention.

"What's that?" Harry asked, pointing to the pictures on the front page. One was a woman who couldn't have been more than five years older than Harry. The other was a very old man.

Hermione flipped the paper closed so that she could see what Harry was pointing at. Then she shrugged and went back to her previous article. "Just the usual disappearances."

"What disappearances?" Harry asked.

"There are a couple each week. The Ministry says it's something to do with that massive breakout from Azkaban last winter," Hermione said, turning the page of the paper.

Before Harry could voice his confusion, Andy, Nadine, and Ginny sat down then across the table from Harry and Hermione, but Harry didn't give them a second thought as he continued talking to Hermione. It was only his friend's shifty looks toward them that caused him to look over and nod at them.

"Is it true?" Nadine asked, looking at Harry with shaken eyes.

"Is what true?" Harry asked.

"Was there something in the Chamber of Secrets that attacked Naomi? Did you know how to stop it?" she asked. Harry felt uncomfortable with the way she was looking at him, like she trusted him, like she knew him, like she wouldn't take any rumors seriously without his approval. She was looking at him as she might look at a good friend, and though it was still hard to realize, Harry recognized that she thought she had known Harry since they were born, basically.

"Neville's retelling the story now," Harry said, avoiding lying. "I'm sure he'll start again for you."

"I've heard his version," Nadine said quickly, leaning across the table and only narrowly avoiding putting an elbow in the bowl of jam. "I've heard Neville's self-congratulatory story so many times that I'm almost glad Nadia and Stephen charmed those eggs to crack over his head all day."

Andy smiled. "Ginny taught them that charm."

"My parents are coming in an hour or so," Nadine said, "and I just want them to know the truth. I want to know the truth and I heard that you a part of that."

Harry shrugged again. Ginny glared at him.

"Listen, don't get any crazy ideas about what happened," Harry cautioned, absentmindedly picking up his fork and tapping it against his water glass. "I didn't do anything. I just brought Neville to the professors basically."

“Still, when Naomi wakes up today or tomorrow, I’m sure she’ll want to thank you,” Andy said, putting an arm around Nadine, drawing her closer to him. She seemed to calm down a bit with the proximity.

“She’s waking up so soon?” Harry asked, surprised. It had taken months to grow the Mandrakes in his own world.

Nadine looked at Harry. “I know you and she don’t always get on, but she’ll want the papers to know—”

“No, no,” Harry said quickly. “No papers. Nothing like that.”

Everyone within hearing distance looked startled by something and shot Harry decidedly odd looks that he chose to ignore in favor of the previous line of conversation.

“How is she waking up?” Harry asked. “Where’s Pomfrey getting the Mandrake root from?”

“Dad’s visiting this afternoon,” Andy said, as if that answered Harry’s questions. From the look on everyone’s face, it apparently should have. Hermione seemed to understand Harry’s confusion.

“It’s a good thing Mr. McGrath owns the Eeylops Owl Emporium chain and has so many business connections with international herbologists, isn’t it?” Hermione said. The others all looked strangely at her, but Harry was infinitely grateful.

“Is Christine coming?” Harry asked, looking up interestedly at Andy. But before his blonde-haired friend could respond, Ginny slammed her spoon down and stormed out of the Great Hall. Harry looked after her, terribly confused. He looked back at Andy and Nadine, then finally Hermione.

“She’s your best friend,” Hermione whispered. “You ought to chase after her and see what’s wrong.”

Harry wanted to tell Hermione that was ridiculous, but figured he wanted to know what was wrong with Ginny anyway. He got up,

stuffed his letters in his pocket, and followed the pretty redhead into the hall, barely noticing Parvati's glare as he went.

Ginny hadn't gotten far: no more than a corridor and a half, where she was leaning against a wall in a semi-secluded corner. Harry walked up with measured steps.

"You all right?" he asked.

Ginny opened her eyes and glared at him. "Why aren't you telling them?"

Harry blinked. "Telling who what?"

"Telling everyone the truth!" Ginny exclaimed, pushing herself away from the wall and turning to face Harry completely. "Why are you just sitting there letting Neville tell his version?"

"I don't care whose version people hear as long as I'm not in it," Harry said truthfully.

"But he's acting like it was all him, like he saved Naomi and killed the basilisk and saved the school!" Ginny complained. "He's acting like—frick. All he did was ask that bloody sink to open."

"That was more than I could do," Harry said, feeling a sharp pang of something unpleasant as he realized that he would have been of no help to anyone facing a basilisk.

"He spoke Parseltongue! He's basically evil and—"

"Don't tell anyone that!" Harry cut her off, taking a step toward her. "Please, Ginny. Don't let—"

"Everyone already knows, Harry. This is Hogwarts. The people that don't know yet will know by the end of the day. That's why the Great Hall was so quiet and filled with whispers!"

Harry slammed his hand into the wall.

“He’s their only hope and people are going to turn on him because he can speak to snakes! It’s the dumbest, stupidest, most pigheaded—”

“You can’t honestly feel sorry for Neville, can you?” Ginny yelled. “He’s stealing your glory!”

“I don’t want any glory!” Harry shouted back. “I just want normal! That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“What’s wrong with you, Harry?” Ginny exclaimed. “You never let people just run you over. You never settle for the background.”

“They aren’t running me over,” Harry returned hotly. “I want Neville to take the credit. I want teachers not to mention me. I don’t want to be linked to the Chamber in any way except through my friendship with Naomi. And I certainly don’t want you to be linked to it again.”

Ginny stared at him, annoyed. “What do you mean again?”

“Nothing.” Harry shook his head and looked out the high window, watching the morning brighten. “Nothing. Listen, I have to go talk to Professor Lupin before class starts. I’ll talk to you after Christine and Matt arrive.”

Ginny glared as he walked away, but Harry didn’t notice. Instead, he found himself more interested with the swishing back of a black robe that turned the corner just ahead of him. He knew that cloak. It was Snape’s. Had he been listening? Why would he bother? And why would he bother to leave?

Considering the question, Harry made his way toward the Defense classroom. He hoped to catch Professor Lupin before he began teaching. He hoped to get back into Defense after dropping N.E.W.T. Arithmancy, Ancient Ruins, and Divination. When he arrived at the professor’s office, Harry knocked politely.

“Come in,” Remus called out. The familiar sound of his voice made Harry feel both hopeful and anxious. Hopeful because this was the man he had trusted with his life for years. Anxious because this man had been looking at him during breakfast like he was a stranger.

Harry pushed open the door. "Hello, Professor Lupin."

Lupin looked slightly startled. "Hello, Mr. Potter." Harry sort of shuffled his feet. "Was there something you wanted?"

Well, let's see, Harry thought. "Do you remember an alternate timeline?"

"No," Lupin said.

Harry thought about that a moment, considered the fact that he and Lupin didn't really know one another, thought about the fact that he trusted Professor Lupin, but that he also knew that Lupin would have told Dumbledore about the change in the timeline. Not that Harry thought that was necessarily a bad thing. Going to Dumbledore when something was amiss made sense. But that Robert fellow had said Harry needed to find the person he trusted to tell no one. What a bother.

"No, I don't suppose you would," Harry said. Up until this point he had counted on everyone he asked to believe it was a stupid, strange prank that Harry was pulling, asking them about an alternate timeline. Lupin's response initially worried Harry as he thought the professor might have taken him seriously. Luckily, Lupin quickly disproved that theory.

"Are you here to trivialize my ability as a professor again?"

"What? I wouldn't—"

"Oh, it was all a joke. I know that now. I knew that then," Lupin said, picking up his cup of tea and taking a sip. "And when the students were laughing and I wasn't, were you having a good time?"

Who was this angry man? Who the hell was the Harry of this world?

"I want to join the Defense class," Harry said.

“You made it abundantly clear last year that you had no desire to participate in my class,” Lupin said. “Or are you now suggesting that I be replaced?”

“No, I don’t want you replaced,” Harry said. “I just want to take N.E.W.T. Defense classes.”

Lupin looked at him for a long moment, eventually standing up and walking around the desk to lean against it as he continued to regard Harry. “Why?”

Harry shrugged again. “It’s the only class I’m really good at.”

“Your other professors disagree, but I think you know that already.” Lupin kept staring at him and Harry hoped he could see the honesty in his words. “Now why do you really want to rejoin this class? Is it because you finally understand that it’s necessary for the Auror training program? Is it because you can’t bear the thought of being second in your year?”

The respectful yet tastefully snide tone with which Remus Lupin spoke was not something Harry had ever heard before. Even when he was talking to Snape, even when he had been standing over Peter Pettigrew, Lupin had never spoken this way.

“It’s the only class I love,” Harry said.

“Last year you said my class was one which you’d be glad to never see again,” Lupin said, setting down his mug.

“Listen, if it’s easier, I won’t be in your class. I’d just like to work with you on Defense—”

“So you would like me to take time from my schedule to help you be—”

“Expecto Patronum,” Harry said, pointing his wand toward the space directly in front of Lupin. The previously semi-dark office lit up. The tall, proud, bright form of the stag patronus stood in between them, turning to look at Harry and then Professor Lupin. The professor

looked shocked and almost sick as he reached out a hand toward the stag without blinking. His hand passed right through. The stag bowed and disappeared.

The silence in the room felt like the worst kind of curse, cast with reluctance and causing the most pain because it brought back wonderful, dead memories.

"You can cast a corporeal Patronus?" Lupin finally asked.

"I had a good teacher."

"Why haven't you told anyone?"

"A lot's changed this summer," Harry said, still hoping that seeing the ghostly image of an almost-Prongs might help Harry's case for lessons.

"Who taught you how to perform that spell?"

Harry looked directly at his professor. "You."

Remus shook his head and looked at the ground, clearly writing Harry's comment off as a joke. Harry took this as a hint to leave but made no move.

"Meet me here tomorrow night at eight," Lupin said.

And Harry would have smiled if Lupin hadn't sounded so defeated.

"Well, have you considered who you'd pick?" Hermione asked Harry, setting her bag of books down on a table in the common room after lunch when both she and Harry had a break.

"Pick for what?" Harry asked, sitting down on a couch, flipping through Advanced Transfiguration. Hermione huffed and Harry knew it was time to look up. She wore a very exasperated look on her face.

“Pick to be the One Who Lived,” Hermione said in that condescending tone which Harry hated. His Hermione hadn’t sounded that pompous since first year. And maybe not even then.

“Oh, that,” Harry said, looking down at his book again, “not really. There’s no point until I figure out the Secret Keeper.”

“Well, that’s a catch-22.”

“A what?” Harry asked, looking up again. Resigned to the fact that they were going to have this conversation, Harry set down his book. Which was a shame because Transfiguration was one of the only classes in which Harry felt up to speed.

“It’s a no-win situation. What good is finding the Secret Keeper if you don’t know what sort of world you have to convince them to want?”

“What good is knowing who I want to be the One Who Lived if I can’t make it happen?” Harry returned. Hermione shot him a look.

“That’s a circular argument.” Hermione took a moment to just revel in the absurdity of the situation. Harry reopened his book and tried to make sense of the paragraph about the theory of nose transfigurations in mammals. For a moment there was perfect silence.

“So you haven’t made any progress with either person?” Hermione asked. Harry sighed and shut his book again, shaking his head at Hermione. She, in turn, leaned forward and began riffling through her bag.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked.

Hermione pulled out a quill, an inkbottle, and a piece of parchment. “We’re making lists.”

Harry smirked. It was nice to find a piece of home in this strange world. “All right.”

“Let’s start with possible replacements.” Hermione looked imploringly at him, her quill poised above the page in eager anticipation. She was at her finest taking notes.

“Let’s start with the Secret Keepers,” Harry countered.

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” Hermione said. “You only want to start there because, though you won’t tell me what, there’s something that makes you uncomfortable about picking someone to replace you. It isn’t that you don’t want to someone else to take your place, it’s that you don’t want to force anyone else to do it and to have to endure what you and our Neville have faced. If we ignore that fact and focus on the idea that you have to choose someone, we’ll do better. Just start listing people you’d feel comfortable facing what you’ve faced already.”

That was difficult. Who would Harry have wanted to go down and protect the stone? Who would he have wanted to face the basilisk and save Ginny Weasley? Who would he trust to befriend and help Hagrid? To free Sirius Black and enter the Third Task?

“You know, I think I might have chosen Neville,” Harry said, leaning back in his sofa and twirling his quill absentmindedly through his fingers. Hermione scribbled away. “I mean, if I hadn’t come to this world and seen what a prat he would become, if that man Robert had actually made me choose someone, I think it’d have been Neville. But not anymore.”

Hermione’s quill stopped. “Why not anymore?”

Harry stopped twirling his quill, but continued to stare up at the ceiling. “My world’s Neville—he’s—well, all right, he has this frog,” Harry turned his eyes to Hermione. “Trevor. The frog’s a bloody nuisance. Always missing and jumping out of windows and things. But the frog’s from his uncle and when Snape threatened to make Trevor drink the potion Neville made, Neville worked as desperately as I’d ever seen him. And when Trevor’s missing, he freaks. I’d trust that Neville. But I

think this world's Neville would throw Trevor into the lake and demand a unicorn for a pet."

It did not seem that Hermione really understood the purpose of the story, but she crossed out Neville's name anyway.

"All right. List some other people."

"Well, you, of course," Harry said, motioning toward her. Hermione's quill did not move.

"Me? Why me?"

"Why not you?"

"I'm a Muggleborn."

"But you're also the brightest witch in our year." Harry shook his head at her. Why would she think he wouldn't pick her?

There was a long pause, punctuated by Hermione's quill scraping on the page to title the parchments and then, almost haltingly, write her name on one of the lists.

"I'd also put you on the Secret Keeper list," Harry said, "but I think we both know that you don't remember the other world. Which is a problem, as I thought for sure it'd be you or Ron, though obviously you'd have told one another and me so you couldn't really be the one I trust to tell no one."

Harry had been thinking aloud there without considering the words beforehand and he hadn't even realized how his bushy-haired friend might interpret them until she spoke up again.

"In your world," Hermione said hesitantly, "do we date?"

Harry looked at her, shocked. "What? No."

"Oh."

“Why?”

Hermione picked up her books and held them against her chest. “It’s nothing—It’s just that sometimes, you say my name a certain way, like you trust me.”

“Yes, I trust you. You’re my best friend,” Harry said without thinking. “You’re my best friend—you and Ron—and you’ve saved me from detention and Death Eaters and even a giant plant intent on eating me.”

“I did all that?” She didn’t sound like she believed him.

“And more,” Harry said. “You deciphered one of Snape’s logic puzzles, identified the creature in the Chamber of Secrets, time-traveled to save a hippogriff and a convicted murderer, taught me the Accio charm—which later saved my life—, and started a club to tutor Defense students. That’s the Hermione I know. That’s my best friend. You even managed to out hex a Ministry official.”

And in Harry’s mind the list went on and on. She knit scarves and stood in front of Harry when she thought Sirius was trying to kill him. And that, of course, made him remember the most recent thing his best friend had done for him: followed him against her better judgment to the Department of Mysteries.

Hermione fiddled with the edge of her pieces of parchment. “Do you miss her?”

“What?” Harry asked, confused. Hermione shook her head briefly.

“You just sound so sad, talking about all of that,” she said. “I was wondering if you were sad because you missed your friend.”

“Oh, I’m not sad because of you,” Harry said. “I’m just remembering something else you did.”

“What was that?”

“Came with me to try and save my godfather at the Ministry. A Death Eater cursed you pretty badly and I—it was my fault.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

There was an uncomfortable pause. “Sounds like we have a lot of adventures.”

“We do, you, me, and Ron. I trust you with—well—a lot,” Harry said, finding it difficult to voice the amount of trust he put in this bushy haired girl that didn’t quite know him.

There was another one of those awkward pauses.

“Well,” Hermione said, business-like again, “who else should we put on the lists?”

By the time their next class was about to start, there were almost no people on the lists, but that was mainly due to the fact that Harry would name someone and then quickly decide that he would never really trust that person: McGonagall, for example, was nixed as Secret Keeper because, though Harry trusted her with his life, he firmly believed she would report directly to Dumbledore. She had, however, been put on the replacement list.

Hermione was not satisfied. She told Harry that his assignment for that week was to make his own list and that they would go over it together that Friday and narrow it down then. Until then, he was only to add name without crossing anyone off. He nodded, put the two pieces of parchment in the back pages of his Transfiguration book and used them as book marks, occasionally taking them out and putting names on them throughout the next few days without thinking.

“Ouch!” Neville said as Harry and Hermione passed him on their way out of the common room.

“What is it, Neville?” Harry asked, surprised to see Neville alone instead of surrounded by adoring fans.

“Nothing, just a headache,” Neville said, rubbing his scar.

Harry looked more closely at him. “Is it a headache or is it your scar?”

“Don’t be thick, Harry. Scars don’t hurt,” Neville said, walking past them and into the common room.

“Prick,” Harry said, shaking his head at Neville’s back. “And where’s his constant group of followers and bodyguards?”

“His bodyguards don’t come to school,” Hermione said as the pair left to portrait hole.

“What?” Harry asked. “I was just jokingly calling his friends his bodyguards. He has real ones?”

“Sure, after the second attack on his family home, the Ministry stepped in and assigned two Aurors to be with him always. Dumbledore put his foot down, though, and said they weren’t to come to school.” Hermione readjusted her bag on her shoulder. “Don’t you have bodyguards in your world?”

“No,” Harry said. “Well, sort of during the summer when there are people around my house, but not real bodyguards. Who attacked him?”

“Just some crazy people,” Hermione said. “A couple that wanted to burn down his house because they thought it was where You-Know-Who fled to and a pair of aging Dark Wizards. But what can you expect when the papers publish your address?”

“Why would they publish his address?”

“For the fan mail,” Hermione said. “Don’t you receive that?”

“No,” Harry said. “I barely receive any mail at all.” But that made him think of Sirius and so he stopped talking about it.

“Oh, well, Neville receives loads.”

“Sounds like he’s pretty spoiled.”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “He’s been taken care of his entire life. Whenever there has been a problem, the Ministry has stepped in to fix the problem. And if they don’t fix it fast enough, his grandmother gets after them in interviews. Needless to say, things get done quickly. His grandmother’s very formidable. Like when she decided he was going to use his dad’s wand and not get a new one, no one even thought to question her, though people thought it was insane.”

“You seem to know a lot about his life,” Harry said.

“Everyone does. He used to give weekly press conferences to talk about his life, but when school started, he cut back a little.”

“That’s sick, how much attention he must have received,” Harry said, “though it does shed some light on his personality.”

“Doesn’t it though?” Hermione asked.

Soon thereafter, the pair split up: Hermione to the library to study and Harry to find Professor McGonagall and drop the class he was supposed to be taking at that moment: Divination.

“Harry!” a voice called out. Harry pulled out his wand and spun around, trying to find the source.

“Christine?” Harry asked, seeing the tall woman smiling as she walked up to him. She briefly embraced him.

“You’re wandering aimlessly,” Christine said, walking with him.

“I’m searching for McGonagall, actually.”

“I just left McGonagall to get some food,” Christine said. She looked tired, Harry thought. “She’s in the Infirmary with the Ryan’s and Matt.

Severus Snape's brewing the potion now and it'll be administered in a few hours."

"For Naomi?" Harry asked, a strange tightness in his chest as he thought about what Naomi's parents must be going through. "Are Nadine and Nadia there?"

"No, they're in class, but after she's awake, they'll be brought in," Christine said. Harry looked up and noticed the Fat Lady and realized that they had been heading in the wrong direction if they'd wanted food. But then Christine made a sharp left and opened the wall, revealing a hidden staircase that Harry had never seen on the Marauder's Map.

"Do you have class now?" Christine asked. Harry shook his head.

"I'm dropping Divination," Harry said.

"Join me then," Christine said, stepping forward. Harry paused for a moment, then followed. "Matt and I are taking you, Andrew, and Stephen out to dinner in Hogsmeade if all of this is resolved early enough. We'd like the Ryans to join us, but they might want to be alone."

It turned out that the Ryans did not want to be alone after Naomi woke up. In fact, the eldest Ryan girl, after a lengthy discussion with the Headmaster, McGonagall, her parents, and her sisters (as well as having heard Neville's version of the tale), insisted on going with the McGraths.

She didn't talk much through dinner, but that wasn't different than normal. She had never talked much. Their mutual appreciation of silence had been one of the things that made her and Harry understand each other so well. Throughout the summer and during the mornings when they were the first to eat breakfast at Hogwarts, they barely spoke a word. And neither had wanted to. They simply sat side by side, only once at the beginning of the meal exchanging a meaningful glance and nod. But that was enough.

And that was enough now as well. At least, for them.

Chapter 6

“What was it like being petrified?” Nadia asked Naomi the moment dinner ended. The adults were walking behind them as they journeyed up to Hogwarts, out of hearing distance.

“Nadia!” Nadine scolded.

“I don’t really remember,” Naomi said, smiling at her sisters. “I saw a reflection in a window and then I woke up.”

“You don’t remember anything else?” Nadia sounded disappointed. Naomi shook her head. “Well, I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me too,” Andy said, and everyone went around saying how grateful they were until the parents caught up and they reached the castle. Then the two families split, the children saying goodbye to the parents.

“We’ll be in Hogsmeade first weekend in October again to check on the store. Feel free to visit,” Matt said. Christine nodded and hugged them all in turn—Harry as long as the other two boys.

It wasn’t until they were walking back to the common room that Naomi naturally fell into step beside Harry.

“Thank you,” she said, looking down the corridor and not at him.

“I didn’t do anything,” Harry said, turning to address her. “I just got the right people.”

Naomi looked at him for a long moment and Harry felt vaguely uncomfortable.

“What?” Harry asked.

Naomi shrugged elegantly and said nothing more. They reached the common room together and then split ways as Naomi’s jubilant friends accosted her and a very angry Parvati assaulted Harry by

grabbing his arm and dragging him back out of the portrait hole backward.

“So you’re after a Ryan now?” Parvati asked, letting go of his arm in order to cross her own over her chest.

“I’m after what?” Harry asked, confused. He was used to being yelled at randomly and had found repeating the accusation to be essential.

“You want to date Naomi!” Parvati yelled, trying to shove his shoulders. Harry stepped out of her reach the moment her fingers touched him. The result of which was Parvati makes an angry pushing motion that caused her to stumble forward a bit.

“She was petrified,” Harry said.

“And that makes her attractive?” Parvati screamed, balanced once more.

“No, it makes me happy that she recovered,” Harry said.

“So you are happy to see her!”

“Of course,” Harry said. “What business is it of yours?”

“What—what business is it of mine?” Parvati looked ready to shove him again. “I’m your girlfriend.”

“No, you’re not,” Harry said quietly, not wanting to say that too loudly. A strangled gasp and an almost-sob later, Parvati was blinking back tears. She took several deep breaths and shook her head at Harry.

“I don’t know you any more,” Parvati said, backing away as she look up at the ceiling.

“Parvati—”

“Where’s my boyfriend? My best friend?” Parvati asked, her back against the wall. “Where’s the boy that sends me gag gifts every year

for my birthday and sends my mother roses on hers? Where's—where's the boy who asked me out with a banner in the Great Hall?"

The thought of doing something so audacious—something that could potentially lead to horrible attention—made Harry want to cringe.

"Why do you keep looking at me like that? Like you don't know me?" Parvati sank to the ground, wrapping her arms around her bent legs. "You ignore me. You never look for me. It's like my best friend doesn't even see me any more and I hate myself a little more each day because"—here a sob cut off her words and slashed at Harry's heart—"because I trusted you and I hate that I trusted you. I told you everything and I thought you would always be there but you aren't. And I hate that."

The portrait of a dinner party above Parvati's was filled with people either glaring at Harry over looking pityingly at Parvati. One particularly prominent woman was motioning for Harry to hug Parvati, but he wouldn't do that. He knew he probably should, but he certainly didn't know how to comfort her.

"Why aren't you saying something?" Parvati whispered, staring at her knees. "Why aren't you making this better?"

"I don't know how," Harry said truthfully.

"Do you like Naomi Ryan?" Parvati asked, looking up at him. He shook his head. "Ginny Weasley?"

"No," Harry replied, deciding to relax and sit on the ground. "I don't want to date anyone."

"What about Hermione?" Parvati asked, wiping the trails of tears off her cheeks.

"No!" Harry said.

"Then why didn't you write me? You didn't send a single letter all summer and now you're ignoring me and making me look like such a fool." Parvati was looking at her feet again, but Harry was

remembering what she looked like in her Yule Ball dress. She had always been a bit stunning, hadn't she?

"I didn't write to anyone."

Parvati smiled. "I suppose that makes it a bit better."

So these two students who might have been close sat together and began their first real conversation. Harry learned that she had been bothered by his quietness in class and the way he skipped Divination. Harry learned she had thought he was avoiding her. She learned that Harry was really quite sincere in his desire to be alone. And once she was convinced he wasn't leaving her for someone else she calmed down considerably. Harry also learned that if he didn't forcibly insert himself, he couldn't get a word in edge-wise. But he didn't mind just listening, it meant he could process new information.

The pair walked back to the common room after three quarters of an hour.

"You said you'd always come back to me," Parvati said as the Fat Lady opened. Harry didn't know what to say, but Parvati hugged him close. "I knew you'd never hurt anyone on purpose, but I can't keep waiting for you."

They broke apart and walked into the nearly-empty common room. Parvati went toward the girls' dorm with Lavender right behind. Harry, wanting to sink onto the ground and put his head in his hands, turned toward his own dorm, hoping to fall asleep the moment his head touched the pillow.

But alas, it wasn't to be.

"Who did you tell?" Neville asked, walking up to Harry in a fury the moment he entered the dorm.

"What?" Harry asked. What had he done to evoke these kinds of reactions in Parvati and Neville?

"I know you were the one who told everyone," Neville said, poking a finger at Harry, who reflexively shoved Neville's hand away from his body. And why did they both feel like physically attacking him? It reminded him of Uncle Vernon.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Neville, but you sound crazy," Harry said, letting his right wand slip into his pocket and wrap around his wand.

"They all know, Harry," Neville said, "that I speak Parseltongue. The whole school knows and thinks I'm evil. How did they all find out? No one knew. The professors wouldn't tell!"

It was hard to think Neville's abilities could be kept a secret. Sure, Harry had used his in front of everyone and so that made any past experience with this situation tainted, but nothing remained a secret in the castle for very long. Hell, people had even found out about Harry, Ron, and Hermione going down to save the Philosopher's Stone.

"And I know you're the one that knew I spoke it and you're the one who came to get me and you're the one who had me talk to the sink and you're obviously to one who told everyone," Neville accused. "What was it, Harry? Were you jealous because I'm more famous than you? Were you upset that I saved the world and you were stuck on the sidelines? Did you just want to hurt me? Does this have to do with you not talking to me?"

"Calm down!" Harry said, cutting Neville's rant off. "What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter with me?" Neville repeated. "What's the matter with me?"

Neville took a deep breath and Harry fully expected another burst of nonsensical questioning, but suddenly Neville did something Harry hadn't expected: he broke down.

"They hate me, Harry," he said, shoulders slumping as his posture faded. "They all think I'm a freak, or evil. Some of them even say I might be the heir of Slytherin. That I controlled the basilisk."

"I don't believe that," Harry said awkwardly. "It doesn't mean you're evil."

"How would you know?" Neville asked, sitting down on the foot of his bed. "It might be true. I might be the next dark lord, Slytherin's heir. Maybe that's why Voldemort tried to kill me, because I was competition."

After briefly wanting to hex Neville, Harry thought back on his second year and remembered the doubts that plagued him. He remembered how desperately he had wanted to try on the Sorting Hat, how much he feared that he just might be Slytherin's heir. He even worried that he was evil. That year was the first of multiple times when the student body had turned on him, whispered behind their hands as he walked by.

Well, except for Ron, Hermione, and a select few others. Harry smiled as he thought about the twins ("Make way. Watch out. Seriously evil wizard coming through").

"You're not evil," Harry said, leaning against the post on his bed across from Neville. "And I don't think being a Parseltongue means anything except that you can talk to snakes. It doesn't mean your powerful or anything."

"Hurumph," Neville muttered before looking up at Harry. "But I still might be the heir of Slytherin."

"Voldemort is Slytherin's heir," Harry said, somewhat strangely pleased to see Neville flinch at the name.

"How do you know that?"

"Dumbledore told me," Harry said, "and Voldemort opened the Chamber out of a memory in a diary. Dumbledore will have the whole thing sorted out soon." But Harry wasn't so sure about that last part.

He wasn't even sure if Dumbledore was looking for the diary and the headmaster obviously wasn't very close with this world's Harry.

"So—so Voldemort"—he seemed determined to say the name, though it was obviously difficult for him—"He didn't kill me for my power?"

"You have to talk to Dumbledore about that, but trust me when I say your ability with Parseltongue has nothing to do with you being the next dark lord."

"Then, you're still my friend?" Neville asked, ignoring everything else Harry said.

"Yes," Harry said, rolling his eyes at the fact that Neville could believe Harry would turn on him because of this. Actually, after thinking a moment, Harry was more surprised to find that Neville considered Harry a friend at all in this world.

But Neville was suddenly hugging Harry and so Harry could do little more than feel uncomfortable.

"I'm so glad!" Neville said, tightening his grip briefly before letting go and stepping back. "I tried to talk to Dumbledore and then I owled my gran and uncle. I even wrote to one of my bodyguards, but none of them have gotten back to me and everyone's looking at me like I might blow something up. Trisha and Sandy just waved at me in the corridor and then walked right past me! Some people even outright ignored me!"

And for the first time it occurred to Harry that Neville had never had a 'thing for saving people,' as Hermione might put it. He had grown up in a home with grown-ups who wanted to know his every problem, a home in which those grown-ups helped fix those problems. He had never feared losing the people he loved. Instead, he had attention and fame and security that most other people only wish they had.

Growing up in Neville's world, listening to adults was the way to be happy. Disobeying them landed you with an assassination attempt.

In first year, when Neville was told to stay away from the third floor, he stayed away from it. When he realized Hermione was crying in a bathroom, he had gone to get an adult to help her. And things had worked out because the other students liked him and the figures of authority respected him.

“Hermione,” Harry said, sliding into the seat next to her in Transfiguration, “what the hell am I to Neville?”

Hermione stacked and straightened her parchment. “What do you mean?”

“Everyone keeps saying that we’re best friends, but I thought he hated me,” Harry said, letting his bag fall off his shoulder and onto the ground.

“That’s because everyone found out he was a Parseltongue and he thinks you told people,” Hermione said, holding up and examining the tips of two quills before laying them on the parchment.

“Well, I didn’t.”

“I know.” Hermione took out two bottles of ink and put them in the center of the desk. Then she squinted at them and moved them.

“It’s not like it means he’s evil or anything,” Harry said, roughly swinging his bag off the ground and onto the table.

Hermione looked up from placing her ink in the upper left corner of the desk. “I’m not sure about that. I’ve done some reading and did you know that—”

“Yes, I do know the history of people with Parseltongue and I know that the recorded history isn’t fair,” Harry said. “Besides, Neville wasn’t born with the gift. Voldemort gave it to him when he tried to kill him.”

Hermione grimaced and shook slightly when Harry said Voldemort's name. "Don't say that. But does this mean you spoke Parseltongue in your world?"

"Yes," Harry said.

"Well, that complicates things," Hermione said, turning back to her perfectly ordered desk.

"Complicates what? If Neville hates me, why was he so upset that I ignored him and why did he come running to me with all of those stuck up stories?"

"Well, you have to understand: Neville and you skate the line between enemy and best friend. You're rivals, to say the least. He tells you all those stories about himself to impress you and normally you'd tell him your own stories. Since you quit telling him about them, he thinks either you have a great story or you've decided fighting with him is beneath you. Either way, you're certainly bothering him with the lack of attention you're paying him."

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but Hermione turned to him and continued speaking.

"And the rest of this school just doesn't know how to respond to you either. You've never—well, listen. The Harry I've known wants to be everyone's friend. Everyone whether they are Slytherin or Hufflepuff or Gryffindor. He talks to people. That's probably why he loves dating Parvati so much: people adore her. His greatest challenge is Snape simply because nothing he did ever made that man like him. But he doesn't hate Snape. It all just makes him try harder in Potions. He doesn't hate Neville, he competes with him for attention and laughs the competition away at night to ensure a friendship. He doesn't hate Malfoy."

"Why not?" Harry asked, confused.

"Because that's not what Harry does," Hermione said. "Harry just makes people laugh, sometimes inappropriately and sometimes at

other people's expense, but it's just how he is. He wants everyone to like him and he does it through humor."

It was impossible to feel comfortable while a person described himself in the third person. Yet it was also impossible to think of this funny Harry as a part of himself. Not that Harry didn't laugh, he did. He thought the twins were a riot. But to be the riot? That was different.

"He isn't annoying?"

"Well, he is," Hermione said, "and I don't trust him. Which is to say that I don't really trust you or really believe this hogwash about another reality necessarily. I'm going along with it because you seemed so desperate, but I'm fully prepared for the day when you pull out the rug and announce the joke."

Harry could do little more than stare.

"I think I'd hate someone like that," Harry said.

Hermione shook her head and straighten her parchment again. "No, you don't understand. You can't hate Harry. No one really hates Harry. Neville's the closest to hating him, actually, and he's his best friend."

"What about Snape or Malfoy or Parvati or Naomi?"

"Parvati's Harry's girlfriend and no one understands them. Malfoy doesn't even register on Harry's radar as Malfoy's too busy with his Slytherins and making fun of Neville. Naomi and Snape—well, Naomi's just quiet in general, but I don't think she hated Harry. Harry worked so hard to get Snape to like him and just smiled and winked at Snape whenever he took points off. Snape got so frustrated that he gave up taking points off and now just ignores Harry."

"This doesn't make any sense to me," Harry said, feeling vaguely dirty after learning that his other self wanted Snape to like him. "Snape acted like I was crazy when I glared at him and snapped at him. And all of the teachers took so long to actually listen to my suggestions about the Chamber that I assumed they all hated me."

Hermione straightened her parchment and then glanced at her watch. McGonagall was a minute late to class.

“And the students seemed like zombies around me for a while.”

“Oh, that had nothing to do with you,” Hermione said, looking at him. “That has more to do with the fact that in this world, fear isn’t something people are used to feeling. There was never a rumor of a student in the basement saving a stone, never a rumor that Voldemort might have infiltrated the walls, never a hint that anyone—a student, cat or other—could be hurt within these walls. The Chamber opening was terrifying.”

Soon thereafter McGonagall arrived with a note for Harry, asking that he report to the headmaster’s office, which was really a bother.

Getting to the seventh floor with all of his Transfiguration books (and his book for the classes he had been planning to ask McGonagall to drop after class) sucked. And reaching the statue, Harry realized he had no idea what the password was, so he started guessing.

Twenty seconds into the guessing and making very little headway, the statues moved aside on its own as Severus Snape left. Feeling the brief but intense hatred that Snape evoked, Harry walked past him, up the magical escalator, and knocked on the headmaster’s door.

“Come in, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said. It was strange being in this room again. The last time he’s been here—well. Harry preferred not to think about the last time.

“You wanted to see me?” Harry asked, standing awkwardly near the door. Dumbledore motioned to the chair in front of his desk. Taking a deep breath, Harry walked toward the chair.

“Yes, Mr. Potter. I wanted to discuss what happened with the Chamber.” Oh. Right. Of course. Harry’s stomach tightened. “Can you tell me how you came by your information?”

“Do you remember a different history?” Harry asked in return, hoping the rational side of his brain was wrong and that Dumbledore was the one he trusted. Harry did trust Dumbledore, and who would the headmaster tell? No one. He was very good at keeping secrets. Yet Harry remembered the way Dumbledore looked at and spoke to Harry in Moaning Myrtle’s loo.

“I’m afraid I don’t,” the headmaster said, folding his hands together on his desk. “Should I?”

Harry didn’t understand the sudden dull pain in his left temple or why he had to blink so much. He just felt alone, at that moment. Felt like he had for the first eleven years of his life, living in a cupboard with a family that didn’t acknowledge him and no friends. It hurt each time he saw this world’s Ron glaring at him or Hermione look at him like he was a stranger. It hurt that Dumbledore called him Mr. Potter and that the McGraths loved a person he couldn’t be. That Parvati and Ginny loved the Harry he could have been but wasn’t.

“I come from a different world, and in my world the Chamber opened in my second year and so I knew how to close it again,” Harry said, just sort of giving up. He was sick and tired of pretending to be this Harry he wasn’t, he couldn’t be.

“How curious,” Dumbledore said. Harry looked up at him quickly.

“Do you remember the other world?”

“I’ve said I don’t,” the headmaster reminded him, but Harry wasn’t sure he believed him. Dumbledore had a tendency of protecting Harry from dangerous truths and if he thought Harry would have a better life here, he might lie.

“If you did, would you tell me?”

“I cannot say for certain,” Dumbledore said.

“But you don’t think I’ve just been Confounded or anything?”

“That is a possibility,” Dumbledore acknowledged with a dip of his head, “but your knowledge of Tom Riddle confuses me somewhat.”

Harry wanted to believe the headmaster was lying, but Harry knew Dumbledore better than that. He knew the headmaster abided by a moral code that created a level of formality and politeness that would never let him openly lie to Harry. Dumbledore had never done that. As hard as it was for Harry to realize and accept, the headmaster always had looked out for him. It was Harry himself and his own poor life decisions which created the problems.

“I know about Tom Riddle because he tried to kill me once and spent a great deal of time talking before the attempt,” Harry said, standing. “I don’t want to talk about it. I have some other things I need to take care of.”

And Harry left, his heart breaking as he did so.

Harry spent the better part of the rest of the week with his two lists, upset that Dumbledore, who he trusted most explicitly to keep a secret, was not the one. Harry looked absently at Hermione across the room at a table studying. Possibly the most frustrating thing about this world was that the one person he had trusted enough to tell the truth to wasn’t at all what he thought she would be. His Hermione had long since straightened her priorities. School didn’t run her life and Harry had never questioned her friendship. This Hermione was distant, conceited, and pompous even as she tried to help him along.

She was so close to being his best friend and yet so very different.

Harry looked around the room.

The person he was most comfortable with was the one that neither he nor his other self was especially close with in his world: Naomi Ryan, who ate breakfast with him every morning in silence. Everyone else was just frustratingly different than he remembered. Ron was standoffish. Hermione was like her first year self. Parvati was terribly sad. Andy acted like he was Harry’s best friend. Remus acted like

Harry was a delinquent. And, though Neville had become considerably more human in the past week while people ignored him, he was exactly what Harry never wanted to become: inflated with his own greatness.

What a strange life he might have led.

“Want to see something really interesting, Harry?” Naomi asked, walking up to where Harry was lounging in a sofa, trying to think of names for Hermione’s lists.

“From your tone, I’m assuming I don’t,” Harry said. She threw two photos onto the table in front of Harry. He righted himself in the sofa and picked them up. “What’re these then?”

“The first is a picture of you and Neville getting off the Hogwarts Express last June,” she said, pointing to the photo that showed Harry and Neville laughing and waving at the cameras. “The second is you on September first this year.”

That photo was empty except for the train.

“And?” Harry asked.

“And something’s different,” Naomi said. She had this ability, Harry had noticed, to make her tone sound upbeat no matter what she was saying. It made it possible for her to be snide and quietly rude without anyone catching on fast enough to be really offended.

“Different how?”

“Different in the way that you don’t irritate me anymore,” she said in that same matter-of-fact yet not upset tone. “You don’t tell me I ought to talk more, but somehow now I want to talk more with you. You and Parvati aren’t yelling at each other and making up everywhere. You study in public now, openly admitting that you aren’t some sort of divine student. You never complain about Matt and Christine. You came to visit me in the hospital, not to mention what you did with the professors—”

“Okay, it’s a lot different,” Harry muttered, still looking at the two photos.

“And that,” Naomi said calmly. Harry looked up at her. “That right there. That’s not something you would joke about.”

“What do you want me to say, Naomi?” Harry asked, tired and angry and sick of this entire world.

“Nothing. I only wanted you to know that people are beginning to notice these new choices you’re making.”

“People meaning you?” Harry asked.

“People meaning people.” She put a Daily Prophet in front of Harry, opened to an article that bore his name. Harry put her pictures down on his Transfiguration book and picked up and read the article.

What’s Happening to Harry Potter?

By Norbek Wrottingham

The June day is hot and a group of reporters are sweating as we wait for the arrival of the red steam engine that brings with it the Boy Who Lived. But before the Hogwarts Express fully stops, two boys jump off the train and set off a load of firecrackers, laughing hysterically as the reporters run and the cameraman snap fast photos. And those photos ruled the headlines of the papers the next day: the Boy Who Lived and his best mate Harry Potter.

Yes, it has always been easy to see the friendship between Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter, and for an older generation, it is easy to remember the connections the boys share: both nearly orphaned, both the sons of prominent anti-You-Know-Who fighters. They were even born within two days of one another.

Yet something has changed recently.

While Neville still calls press conferences to announce his departure for school and still answers all requests for interviews, Harry Potter

has become a recluse. He denies all interviews. He turns down the opportunity to be photographed, turning away from the flash of a camera. He has requested that his legal guardians, Christine and Matthew McGrath, tell reports that he wishes to lead a more private life.

Even his photographic self is different: while his pictures arriving at the station after his fifth year still show a laughing, waving, happy Harry Potter, his more recent pictures of boarding the train are empty. He now flees from photos. All of this begs the question: what happened to Harry Potter?

Mrs. Charlene Carmichael recently ran into Potter in Diagon Alley and says, "He was nice. Quiet and shy, almost. Not the rambunctious boy the papers say he is. He was just shopping for books. Looked uncomfortable talking to a stranger."

Recent unconfirmed reports of a disturbance at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry-- which ended as suddenly as it began-- fueled rumors about Harry Potter again, almost a year after his infamous help to the aurors. One source claims Potter helped Headmaster Albus Dumbledore defeat a danger poised to attack the school. Yet, if this is true, why is Harry Potter keeping quiet about the affair? Is the headmaster suppressing one of the wizarding world's greatest heroes?

The article was utter trash. Harry hated the Prophet. It wasn't even reporting any news, just gossiping about Harry. And why would anyone care enough about Harry to print information about him on page four of the Prophet?

"Frick," Harry muttered to himself, putting the paper down.

"There was another article yesterday," Naomi said, "but this one is more specific."

Harry asked, "Who cares what the Prophet says?"

"You," Naomi said. "You used to, Harry, not that long ago."

"You were petrified for a while." Harry looked up at her. "Some things change."

"Harry," Naomi said, leaning forward. "I've known you since you were clinging to your mum's leg, sitting on her foot as she went about her errands. And whatever made you avoid the public, if it's someone threatening you or something, you could talk to me. Or, if it's just you making a choice, you can talk to me anyway."

Naomi stood up and nodded at Harry. He nodded back, not knowing what to say.

After she had gone, Harry spent a good while glaring at the Prophet on the table. Why would they print an article about him not wanting articles written about him? Idiots. He glanced at the lists. He realized that if he weren't sure his seeker keeper needed to be someone he knew before he switched world's, Naomi Ryan would top that list.

He sighed and pulled the lists out, running over the names he'd already written once. As he did so, his eyes caught on a set of names that he couldn't believe he hadn't questioned yet. He'd written them down with a sort of bitterness, but without any real consideration. Yet, they were perfect for each position. Of course they were. What had Harry been thinking?

He stood up out of his chair and scanned the room for Hermione, finding her sitting alone in a corner near Andy, Ginny, and Nadine. He walked over.

"What do you know about Sirius Black?" Harry asked.

Hermione's eyes widened, and was it just Harry or did the common room just lose a couple of decibels? Harry wrote it off as a freak occurrence and thrust his secret keepers list into Hermione's hands, leaning over to point out Sirius's name. He sat down next to her and quieted his voice.

"I can't believe this thought hadn't occurred to me earlier, but he's my godfather and I'd trust him with my life. He wouldn't tell anyone. Well, maybe Lupin, but not if Lupin were here, right?" Harry said, trying to

ignore the sadness when he remembered the real reason why he hadn't thought of Sirius: he was dead in Harry's world and in trying to block out the pain that came with remembering that, Harry had pushed all thoughts of Sirius away as quickly as he could. Well, not quickly enough that he hadn't written his name on this list though.

It only just occurred to Harry that Sirius was alive here. Alive. It filled Harry with hope and fear: hope that Sirius might actually be alive, fear that he might not be, that it might just be a cruel trick of fate to bring them this close, but not close enough.

Hermione was saying something, but Harry wasn't really listening. Her terrified look, though, worried Harry.

"What is it?" Harry asked. "Is he—oh! Is he in Azkaban for the betrayal of my parents? He didn't--"

"What are you playing at, Harry?" Andy asked, walking up to stand behind Hermione.

"I'm not playing at anything," Harry said, aware that siding with a convicted murderer would look bad. Hermione opened her mouth to talk, but shut it. Harry looked at her, noticed her sickly pallor, looked at Andy and realized he didn't look too happy either. Harry got worried again.

"What happened to my father's friends, Hermione?" Harry asked, stealing himself against the answer, keeping his hopes for Sirius caged in a corner of his brain.

"You know all of this," Andy said. Hermione looked like she hoped Andy was right.

"I just want to be sure I understand everything," Harry said doggedly. "What happened to Peter Pettigrew?"

"Harry, this isn't funny," Ginny said, now standing beside Andy and looking angry. "He died. You know that. Sirius Black murdered him."

All right, so it was the same cover. That was good. That let Harry feel less ignorant. "And Sirius? What happened to him?"

"Oh, I understand," Andrew said, shaking his head and grinning. "You just want to remind us all that you're famous and we're not. I understand."

This was the reason he was famous? Something to do with Sirius and Pettigrew? Harry turned to stare at Hermione and asked, "What happened to Sirius?"

"Harry, how many times do you want to hear this story? How many times have you already recounted everything for the newspapers?" Andy asked, rolling his eyes and he leaned against the couch.

"What happened to Sirius?" Harry repeated, still staring at the trapped-looking Hermione.

Finally, Andy and Ginny seemed to understand that Harry wanted a real answer. Hermione seemed to understand too as she said, "He escaped from Azkaban. You helped the Aurors catch him when you read your dad's journal and realized he was an unregistered Animagus dog."

Harry felt like he had been hit by a thousand bludgers. A hundred thousand.

"What?" Harry whispered, shaking his head and staring at Hermione, daring her to tell the truth.

She looked sadly at him. "You read your dad's journal, went to the Ministry and told the Head of Magical Law what you'd learned. After that it was easier for them to find him."

"So," Harry said, trying to breathe, trying to process this crushing information, "so he's in jail. Sirius is in Azkaban."

Hermione looked sadly at him as Andy said, "Are you feeling all right, Harry?"

“Why?”

“Harry, you were there when they administered the Kiss and you were notified when he died and—”

But Harry couldn't hear the rest of Andy's sentence. He was shaking and hearing a loud whirring noise in his ears. And in front of his eyes, instead of the common room, he saw that veil and that thousand-second fall.

Before he knew it, before he planned it, Harry ran out of the common room, headed for nowhere as the sun set outside.

Chapter 7

“Harry!” a voice yelled, but Harry didn’t stop to turn around. He was angry. So angry. Here he was in a world that expected nothing of him, and his other self had hurt Sirius. Here he was within inches of his family, and they were still kept from him.

“Harry! Harry, stop!” The voice wouldn’t go away.

Why did this always happen to his family? Why did it happen to the people he cared about? He was like a plague.

“Nuncaportium!”

Harry slipped and fell, sliding on the smooth stones into the wall. Above him the face of Ginny Weasley appeared with a wand pointed at him. “What’s wrong with you, Harry?”

“What’s wrong with me?” Harry repeated, still too shocked to think properly, though it did occur to him to grab his wand.

“You’ve been acting differently all year,” Ginny said, “but after seeing you in there, asking about Sirius sodding Black so casually, running out of there looking like death walking after hearing about where you put him—”

“Shut up, Ginny!” Harry screamed, his confusion and sadness and denial balling up together and exploding in a cloud of anger. It was like Sirius had died again and to know that he had done it to his godfather was like twisting a knife in his back.

“No,” she yelled back. “Never! You have always talked to me about greatness, about wanting to make a mark in the world, about changing something, and now you suddenly want to take back the one thing you actually did?”

“It was a mistake.” Harry just wanted her to leave him alone. Didn’t she know that this world’s Harry was nothing but a backstabbing arse with no loyalty at all?

“It was a great help to the world,” Ginny defended. Didn’t she see the way he treated his own girlfriend? Wasn’t she concerned at all by the fact that this Harry ignored his best friend?

“It was wrong. I was wrong. Why is that so hard to believe?” Harry asked, sick and tired of trying to be this Harry, revolted that this version of him was connected to him at all, this Harry might have been him.

“Because I’ve never seen you make a mistake before!” Ginny exclaimed, lowering her wand and petulantly stamping her foot in frustration. “Because I’ve never seen you weak before and that’s what it feels like you’re being right now.”

“Weak? You think I’m being weak now?” Harry repeated, wanting to curse something. “No. I’ve apparently been weak my entire life here! It was weak to turn in a man who was my father’s best friend without checking the facts. It was weak to put my face in the paper for destroying a man’s soul. It was weak to want fame, and it was weak to act like I did anything wonderful. I gave Sirius’ name to the authorities like a coward. I did just what Wormtail—”

And then a most horrible thought occurred to Harry: Wormtail.

What happened to Wormtail?

“Scabbers,” Harry breathed out, hatred giving him energy. “Where’s Scabbers?”

“Ron’s rat?” Ginny repeated, off balance from the quick shift in conversation. “What?”

The Map. He needed the Marauder’s Map. Where was it? The twins would have it. Where were the twins?

“Your brothers,” Harry said. “Fred and George, where are they?”

“I don’t know. Home, probably, pranking Mum. Why?” Ginny said. But Harry didn’t respond. Instead, he went as swiftly as he could to the closest secret passage.

Harry ran as quickly as he possibly could through the secret passage under the one-eyed witch. He ran until he was sure his lungs would collapse and then he kept running, the image of Peter Pettigrew etched into his mind's eye. He ran until he was in the village and then he ran into the Three Broomsticks, where he commandeered Floo Powder and ran up to the closest fireplace.

"The Burrow!" he shouted before jumping into the flames. In his hurry, Harry barely noticed his usual nauseousness in the spinning. He just kept thinking, kept realizing that he himself was the betrayer. He, Harry, had been the one to turn on Sirius. He wanted to throw up.

Finally seeing the familiar and comforting sight of the Burrow, Harry stepped out, looking around the Weasley kitchen and feeling a rush of warmth and a sense of security being there. But he didn't have time to linger on that feeling. Mrs. Weasley was screeching at him and brandishing a cooking pot before she recognized him and lowered the pot (which had apparently been cooking something moments before) and asked,

"Harry?"

Harry nodded, glad that she recognized him. "Hello. Sorry. I'm here to see the twins."

"All of you are the same!" Mrs. Weasley said, shaking the pot at him. "You all just come out of the fireplace without a second thought about the fact that the people on the other side might not be expecting you!"

"I'm sorry, but I really—"

"If you had any idea what the war was like, you'd never have just popped out of there. You'd know that I was ready to curse you and had to stop myself." She was getting on a roll, which Ron always said was bad.

"I need to see them."

“Is Ginny with you? What are you doing off school grounds? Does Dumbledore know you’re here?” The volley of questions continued, but Harry couldn’t answer them. All he could think about was the flashing image of Pettigrew behind bars at last. Pettigrew who cut his arm, who brought Voldemort back in his world, who betrayed his parents. Who lets Sirius rot in jail!

“Please,” Harry interrupted, “tell me where the twins are.”

“I’ll not be a party to anyone breaking rules,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“Please, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said, desperation in his voice. “Where are Fred and George?”

Mrs. Weasley looked like she was about to protest again when Mr. Weasley walked in and said, “They’re in their room, Harry.”

“Thank you,” Harry called out over his shoulder as he raced through the kitchen, through the living room, up those old, familiar stairs, and into the Room of Explosions, as the twins had named it.

“Where’s the Map?” Harry asked them immediately after opening the door. Fred and George turned from their workstation to stare at Harry and then one another.

“Nice to see you, Harry,” Fred said.

“Glad you could stop by for a chat, what with school and all,” George added. Harry shook his head, trying to find the words to cut them off but only managing to think of Wormtail. Think of catching and killing him. Think of clearing Sirius’ name.

“Finally decided to ask for our sister’s hand in marriage properly?” Fred asked.

“It’ll cost you—”

“The Map,” Harry interrupted. “I need to see the Map.”

“What Map?” Fred asked, leaning back on the workstation with his elbows.

“The Marauder’s Map. Where is it?” Harry took two more steps forward and the twins took a deep breath each, but did not look at one another, to their credit.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, Harry,” George said, leaning forward and considering Harry.

“I know you’re lying,” Harry said simply, frustrated, thinking that Wormtail might have heard, might be trying to escape at this very moment. “Tell me where the Map is. I solemnly swear I’m up to no good.”

“How’d you know about that?” Fred asked, looking shocked. George, too, looked dumbfounded.

“Prongs was my father,” Harry said, cutting to the chase and taking yet another step forward. “Where is it?”

“Prongs was your father?” Fred repeated, standing.

“Yes, he and his three best mates created the Map.” Harry spoke rather quickly, but refrained from punching either of them by sheer force of will.

“Can I shake your hand, Harry?” Fred asked, and Harry twitched a little in his direction.

“No,” Harry said. “Just give me the Map.”

“But it’s rather amazing to us, Harry”—Fred boosted himself up and sat on the workstation, legs swinging—“to finally have a name to put to our heroes. James Potter was Prongs. Wow.”

“And Sirius Black,” Harry said viciously to get them to focus, “was Padfoot.”

Both twins looked disgusted and almost ready to faint. "Now's not the time for jokes, Harry."

"Don't you think I understand that?" Harry shouted. "But it's true. Sirius was Padfoot and Professor Lupin was Moony and that traitorous son of a bitch was Wormtail. So give me the Map and let me have done with it."

Now George was standing, looking cautious and alarmed and somewhat sad. "Have done with what, Harry?"

"You really don't want to know, George," Harry said.

"How'd you know he was George?" Fred asked.

"Give me the Map," Harry demanded, tired and scared and frustrated and hating himself quite a bit.

"You've always called us Forge," Fred continued.

"That's true," George agreed. "Played on your Quidditch team for four years and you never bothered to learn how to tell us apart, unless you were only playing us all those years—"

"He betrayed my parents!" Harry finally screamed, slamming the palm of his hand into the wall. "He as much as killed them!"

The twins took a breath together again, as if bewildered by this new, screaming Harry they'd never met before. "And that's why he got that sloppy, big Kiss."

Before he knew it, before he could even think about it, Harry's wand was at Fred's throat and George was fumbling for his own in response. Both looked flabbergasted by Harry's mood. In a distant part of his brain, Harry remembered that the twins of his world had been in the D.A. and would have probably reacted more quickly.

"If you ever," Harry said slowly, "speak about what happened to Sirius Black like that again, I'll kill you."

“But you just said he as much as killed—”

“It wasn’t Sirius,” Harry said through his constricted throat. “It was Wormtail. They switched to trick Voldemort. They switched and didn’t tell anyone. It was Peter Pettigrew who gave their name to Voldemort. Peter Pettigrew, who could turn into a rat animagus. Wormtail, who bit off his own finger and lived as Scabbers. Scabbers! At Hogwarts!”

And the twins’ already pale faces paled further.

Harry continued, knowing that they were realizing Harry had turned in the wrong man, realizing that he had destroyed the wrong man’s life. Now they all wanted to throw up. “He’s at Hogwarts as your brother’s pet, but he’d show up on the Map.”

“Harry—”

“Give me the Map,” Harry said.

George looked at Fred, who turned to Harry. “We don’t have it. We gave it to Ginny when we left school.”

Harry wanted to throw a large object at the wall and watch it explode. Instead, he turned around and stormed out of the room, followed closely by the twins.

“Where are you going?” George asked, still looking like he felt revolted by this turn of events.

“To find him,” Harry said shortly. The third stair creaked under his weight.

“Are they in danger? Ron and Ginny?” Fred asked. Harry didn’t say anything as he walked up to the fireplace in the kitchen and searched around a bit for the Floo Powder, finding it in a little bowl on the sill. Grabbing the powder, Harry was about to throw it into the fire when George caught his arm.

“What’s going on?”

Harry yanked his arm away. "I'm going to kill him."

Then Harry tossed the powder into the fire. "Three Broomsticks." Harry walked into the fire before he was sure it was safe.

From there the trip back to Hogwarts went by in a blur for Harry: he didn't remember exactly how he got onto the campus or who he spoke to in order to find Ginny, but soon enough there she was, back in front of him, looking angrier than Harry had ever seen her.

"Get away from me, Harry," Ginny said, standing up from her seat on the couch in front of the fireplace.

"No, Ginny, I need—"

"You need me?" Ginny cut him off, spinning to face him. "You need me now, Harry? Not a few hours ago when I was talking to you and you ran away, but now?"

"Where's the Map?" Harry asked, panic almost overtaking him as he thought about Wormtail and where he might be, if he were in the common room."

"The what?" Ginny asked, staring at him, her hands on her hips. "Is that why you're talking to me now? For the bloody map my brothers gave me?"

"I need it," Harry said.

"You're impossible!" Ginny yelled, yanking her bag off the ground and riffling through it. Then she suddenly pulled out the Map and held it just out of Harry's decent reach (decent because couldn't take it without touching her in some way). "You need to choose Harry, between this Map or our friendship. Is it worth that much to you?"

After a brief pang of guilt washed over him, Harry remembered exactly what that Map represented: the ability to find and catch Pettigrew, to keep him from helping Voldemort rise again, the ability

to finally avenge Sirius and his parents and redo a night when he should have let Lupin and Sirius kill Pettigrew.

“That Map is worth more than my life,” Harry said, grabbing Ginny’s arm to bring her and the map to within reach as he leaned over her to take it from her small hand as another hand landed on his forearm.

“Watch it, Harry, that’s Ginny you’re attacking,” Andy said, an unsure smile on his face which was meant to complete a comforting expression. Harry pulled away from him, the Map in his hand and his wand now in the other.

“I solemnly swear I am up to no good,” Harry said quickly, watching the lines spread out at their painfully slow pace. Where was he? Where was Pettigrew?

Unbeknownst to Harry, various students were talking to him, asking him what was happening, what was going on, but the voices and questions faded into the background of his mind. The Map was his focus. Or, at least, it was until two voices broke through his mental haze. The Map wasn’t done yet as he flipped the pages in search of the bold name: Peter Pettigrew.

“What are you looking for, Harry?” Hermione asked, standing awkwardly in the middle of a group of people staring at him. Harry didn’t notice as his eyes scanned the third floor.

“Harry? Are you all right?” Nadine asked, looking scared as she stood in front of him, a hand on each of his wrists.

“No, I’m not all right,” Harry muttered, flipping the Map again. “Where’s Wormtail? Where is he?”

And then Harry heard something he would later wonder how he heard (though it was rather late at night and there were only a few students left in the common room): the squeak of a rat. Harry’s eyes shot up and to the portrait hole where Ron was climbing inside, Wormtail in his pocket.

Wormtail.

Harry crossed the room in a moment, but Wormtail was out of Ron's pocket sooner than that. Still, Harry might have caught up with him if Ron's arm hadn't caught and blocked Harry's path.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked, trying to stop a wand-brandishing Harry from chasing after his pet, but without thinking, Harry threw a spell at Ron and continued after the rat unhindered.

Wormtail ran down corridor after corridor, cut through more secret passages than Harry knew existed, until they were in front of the one-eyed witch and then in the secret passage leading to Hogsmeade. That was when finally Harry caught up with Peter Pettigrew in his rat form and banished him into the side of the tunnel.

"Transform!" Harry yelled, seeing red at the sides of his vision.
"Transform!"

But the rat only tried to run away again. Tried to scramble out of Harry's wand's reach.

"If you don't Transform, I will kill you, Peter Pettigrew," Harry said, magically throwing Wormtail into the wall again, hoping to see him die painfully. "Change back. I know it's you."

And only then, trapped between Harry's wand and the sides of the tunnel (and threatened with another slam into the wall), the limping rat began to grow. But as much as Harry hated Wormtail in his rat form, it was nothing compared to the overwhelming loathing that Harry felt for the man Pettigrew, the man that Harry last remembered from a cemetery when he stabbed Harry with a knife after killing 'the spare.' He had helped raise Voldemort again. The man, in short, needed to die.

"Harry, dear Harry. Friend," Pettigrew whispered, on all fours, obviously hurt.

“You are not my friend, you sorry, betraying son of a bitch.” Harry wanted so badly to kick the rat-man in the face and watch him bleed instead of seeing him shaking as he stood, his beady eyes on Harry.

“What do you mean, Harry? I’ve lived with you for six years, protecting you!” The man was cowering on his haunches, huddled in the mud of a passageway four best friends found—four best friends who were now all dead, in their own ways, because of this man.

“I’m going to kill you,” Harry said, jaw tightened and wand held firm in his grip.

“Why? Why? What did I do but try to kill Sirius?” Pettigrew said, opening his arms in supplication to Harry.

“Sirius wasn’t the Secret Keeper!” Harry yelled, shaking with anger. “It was you. They all trusted you. My parents. Sirius. They thought they could trust you with their lives and you betrayed them and then framed Sirius! You must have laughed when you heard about me turning in Sirius!”

Pettigrew shook his head violently. “I would never betray Lily and James!”

“Liar!” Harry yelled. “You joined the Dark Lord and you helped him rise again!”

“Harry, I loved them!” Peter pleaded, falling to his knees and reaching to touch Harry’s robe, breaking Harry’s last nerve.

“Expelliarmus!” Peter went flying into a wall, his frayed robes falling awkwardly off him to reveal his left forearm and the horrible Dark Mark burning there. What? Harry looked more closely. If it was that clear, it meant that— Peter leaped up and punched Harry in the face, snatching his wand out of his hand as the teenager fell to the ground from the impact of the cheap shot. Harry froze.

“Just like everyone else,” Peter muttered, sort of to himself, giving Harry the impression that he was a bit mad. “You underestimated me. They all did.”

"No," Harry spat the word. "They trusted you."

"And who survived, Harry?" Pettigrew asked, standing completely still in front of Harry with his back against the wall and his rat-like features twitching. "Was it amazing James with his Quidditch and brilliance? Was it Sirius and his charisma? No. It was little Peter Pettigrew. Me."

"Good to know you still know your name," Harry said. Pettigrew shook like an angry leaf and waved Harry's wand at him.

Then the shaking stopped when Pettigrew leaned forward. "Do you know who else didn't survive? Perfect little Lily Evans."

Harry made an angry motion at Pettigrew, but the inept wizard locked him in place with a spell. Straining against the spell with all of his might, Harry might have broken Pettigrew's neck then without thinking.

"Ironic, isn't it?" Pettigrew asked, sounding more confident now that he knew Harry was incapacitated. "Beautiful, perfect, strong Lily Evans is locked in a hospital room babbling at James like he's the only person in the world. It's what he wanted all those years ago. Oh yes, it's quite ironical that the strongest man and woman I've ever known made each other weak and foolish. Little Peter Pettigrew, who no one suspected, brought James and Lily down. And the only reason their famous son survived was because he was at the neighbor's house."

"They would have died for you!" Harry screamed, livid and understanding only half of what was said. "They loved you and this is—"

"They did not love me!" Pettigrew yelled, backhanding Harry suddenly. "James and Sirius and Remus once did, but then they did just what the Dark Lordsaid they would: they asked me to die in their place. They asked me to be their Secret Keeper and sacrifice my life for you and your mother."

"You were a spy a year before that!" Harry exclaimed, trying so hard to strike at this man and finding his right hand moving a fraction of an inch from its frozen position.

"Well, yes, I was." Pettigrew seemed lost in thought. "How did you find all of this out? No one knew. No one knows. If I were to kill you right now, no one would even suspect me as the murderer. I'm dead."

"Not dead enough!" Harry gasped with the effort to move his other arm.

"How did you suspect that Sirius hadn't betrayed your parents? I didn't think anyone would believe him a traitor at first because it was Sirius, and he loved them both, but then everyone was so ready to lock him away. And you were perfect too, sending him to the Kiss!"

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up, you rat-faced bastard!" His body moved more as his anger fueled his movements.

Harry's insult did not seem to penetrate the twitching man's mind. "Sirius always said I was a rat because I was small and slow. But you want to know the truth? The Dark Lord told me it. I'm a rat because rats know how to survive. A hurricane hits a town and the deer and dogs and wolves die. It's the rats that swim and float and fight their way to land. Small. Clever. Brutal. That's a rat."

Harry struggled more as he snapped, "You stood atop my parents' drowning bodies to live."

"I found land!" Pettigrew was losing control, Harry could see it. He was going mad.

"A land of snakes, and do you know what snakes eat?"

"You think your parents were any better? The Dark Lord has offered me power and honor when this ends. Should I have given that up for death, like everyone else, and a life that promised me no glory? Should I have settled for a life in the shadows of men who were once my best friends but who had long since outgrown me? The Dark Lord

is going to win. There is no question. And I will not be found dead on the wrong side when I could be on the right side with glory!”

Pettigrew stopped twitching, stopped staring off down the tunnel as if it were a mirror reflecting his past, and turned to look at Harry quite seriously, with a slightly knowing smirk on his lips.

“I’ve watched you for six years, Potter,” Pettigrew said. “Clever boy. Funny boy. I know you would do the same if you had the choice.”

“I would never side with Voldemort!” Harry said defiantly. Pettigrew shook at the name and terror visibly entered his eyes.

“What if he offered you the thing you want most in the world?” Pettigrew asked, his voice growing soft. “What if he offered you gold and glory? What if he offered you fame?”

When Eve was offered the apple, had it sounded like this? Like the answer ought to have been inevitable?

“I don’t want fame,” Harry said, a flood of loathing overwhelming his sense as he tried once more to desperately move. “I just want you dead.”

And that was when Harry launched himself at Pettigrew and knocked the other man down. Rolling on the ground, groping for his wand, it took Harry a moment to realize that Pettigrew had disappeared. And that there was a rat scurrying up the wall and into a hole. Harry found his wand and scrambled closer to the wall.

“Accio rat! Accio rat! Accio Pettigrew!” But it was to no avail. Harry clawed at the hole, screaming the charm again and again, refusing to believe that Wormtail had gotten away. Not again. Not like this. Not when Harry should have—Not when he was so very close!

Chapter 8

He Loved Them

Running through the rest of the tunnel, climbing out at Honeydukes and into the store, there was little doubt that Harry had not a single rational thought pass through his head. Instead, he kept remembering Peter Pettigrew. He had almost convinced himself that if he just ran faster, ran harder he could find and capture Pettigrew. He could bring him back to the castle. Clear Sirius's name.

But it was night while he searched the town for the rat and a villager took immediate note of the wizard in Hogwarts' robes that shattered a window as he ran out of the closed Honeydukes store with a lit wand. His jerky movements – like he couldn't quite move his arms properly—made Harry even more suspicious-looking.

"You there, boy, what're you doing?" the man asked, but Harry ignored him.

"Accio rat!" he screamed without thinking as he ran to the place he knew Pettigrew must have crawled through. It was hard to see in the dark. Harder still to hear a stranger's increasingly alarmed tone. There were more important things. More important.

"Who are you looking for?" the man asked, stepping into Harry's line of vision.

Harry didn't reply as he walked right past the man.

"Harry Potter?" the stranger asked. Harry whirled on him, lighting his wand.

"How do you know me? Have you seen Peter Pettigrew?"

The man looked upset. "Peter Pettigrew's dead, son."

"No, he's not! I just cornered him, but he transformed and ran off," Harry said, turning away from the man to continue his search. He hadn't considered the idea that the man might hit Harry with a

powerful Calming Charm and lead him back to Hogwarts, where (still whispering about a man who might get away) they put him in the Hospital Wing for the night for observation.

Harry woke up in that horribly sudden way that implies an unnatural awakening, one that resulted from spell work. That put Harry on edge immediately, reaching for his wand before his eyes were fully open. Not being able to locate his wand made Harry even more nervous. And when the memories of where he had last been came back to him, Harry was ready to start fighting immediately.

Until Albus Dumbledore began to speak, asking, "Do you know where you are, Harry?"

Harry's eyes shot wide open and he sat up higher in the Hospital Wing bed that Hermione had once said ought to be reserved for him. "What am I doing here? Did you catch him? He's in Hogsmeade."

About to stand again, Harry found himself agitated when Dumbledore laid a restricting hand on his arm. "Mr. Potter, you've recently been limb-locked."

"It was Wormtail," Harry said, shrugging off Dumbledore's hand and moving to stand again. "We need to catch him. He might still be in—"

"You've been asleep all night, Mr. Potter," the headmaster said. Harry turned to him, devastation and horrible regret leading him to sit on the edge of the bed.

"What?"

"A villager in Hogsmeade found you in a terrible state and he grew concerned about your health. Noticing that you held a wand, he stunned you and brought you to the castle. After speaking with your fellow students, Madam Pomfrey and I determined that you needed to rest the night through."

“But—” Harry couldn’t exactly find the words to express the disappointment and self-hatred he felt at that moment. He had messed everything up. Where had his constant vigilance gone? “You let him go!”

“Could you tell me what happened last night?” Dumbledore asked, looking so much like the careworn headmaster from Harry’s own world that Harry felt a pang of kinship with this man who did not call him Harry. So Harry told him about chasing Pettigrew out of Gryffindor tower and into the tunnel, about the fight and the Dark Mark on his arm. And then about Pettigrew transforming and getting away and Harry chasing him.

“Then you have no recollection of attacking Ronald Weasley?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry’s face and heart fell. “What?”

“Mr. Weasley incurred serious burned on his chest as a result of what appeared to be a rather powerful curse.” Dumbledore looked upset and sad and angry all at once. Harry felt horribly. He’d attacked Ron?

“I never meant to hurt Ron,” Harry said. “I only wanted to get Pettigrew. I wanted to kill him.”

“You wished to become a murderer,” Dumbledore repeated, still sounding so sad and disappointed that normally Harry would have hated himself, but right then all Harry felt was anger.

“You think I care about what would have happened to me?” Harry asked, standing to face his headmaster. “I once pitied the man, and look where that led me! A life in Azkaban is worth murdering him.”

Dumbledore considered him over his half-moon spectacles. “You read about this betrayal in your father’s journal?”

“Find Peter Pettigrew! Interrogate Pettigrew!” Harry yelled, slamming his hand on the bed, so frustrated with the situation that he wanted to blow something up.

“Peter Pettigrew the Order of Merlin recipient?” Dumbledore asked gently, sounding like he wanted Harry to doubt his own claim.

“Would you rather it have been Tom Riddle, Head Boy and Special Services recipient?” Harry asked defiantly. “It was Pettigrew. He cut my arm and brought Voldemort back!”

“Mr. Potter, when did you learn that Mr. Pettigrew was an animagus?” Dumbledore asked calmly, still sitting so freaking still. It reminded Harry of how he sat at the end of last year and Harry hated that memory.

“Years ago,” Harry admitted.

“And yet you decided to only begin chasing him last night.”

“You think I’m wrong, don’t you? You think I’m confused,” Harry said, so angry he couldn’t see straight. “I’m not confused. You’re blind! Voldemort isn’t gone. He isn’t dead. He disappeared for a while, but he’s rising again.”

Dumbledore, still calm, asked, “How did you come to this conclusion?”

“You—You must realize that it’s true! The first rising was riddled with disappearances. Have you read the paper lately? Have you seen what’s happening in the Muggle world? Clue in! He’s back.”

“Mr. Potter—”

But Harry wouldn’t let himself be interrupted. “Pettigrew’s Dark Mark was black! You need to start preparing. Contact the Order of the Phoenix. Train Neville!”

Dumbledore raised a hand, and every door and window in the Hospital Wing shut. “Surely your father didn’t write about the Order.”

“Of course he didn’t write about that!” Harry said, not knowing if it was true but thinking his father had to have been smarter than to write about a secret society composed of Voldemort’s greatest enemies.

“Nor did he write about Trelawney’s first prophecy, but I know about that as well!”

Dumbledore looked like he was feeling something at last: shock. Well, good. Harry had been trying to make him feel something all year.

“I know that Neville’s marked and you need him!” Harry exclaimed.

“How did you—”

“The same way I know about Pettigrew and the disappearances!” Harry exclaimed. He leaned in very close to Dumbledore. “Listen, if you’re the bloody secret keeper, tell me. I need to talk to someone about this. Anyone. I need to know I’m not crazy.”

But Dumbledore never answered because at that moment the Hospital Wing doors opened and Christine and Matt McGrath walked in, looking both scared and terribly tired. Harry looked at them and then back at Dumbledore.

“You all right?” Christine asked, walking up to Harry and kneeling in front of him to be at eye level with him. Matt stood beside her looking both concerned and terribly confused.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked, ignoring Christine, who was checking him over for bruises. He unconsciously leaned away from each of her touches.

“You’re being suspended, Mr. Potter, for attacking a fellow student,” Dumbledore said calmly as he stood up. It was as if they hadn’t just been talking about the Order of the Phoenix, as if he weren’t the secret keeper, as if his entire conversation with Harry had been a chat about the weather.

And right then, Harry knew that this Dumbledore wasn’t his own. This Dumbledore didn’t trust Harry—not with the knowledge of the Order and certainly not about a story about Peter Pettigrew alive and hexing. Dumbledore didn’t tell Harry anything, apparently. As much as Harry had felt betrayed by and frustrated and angry with Dumbledore at the end of his fifth year, it was nothing compared to what he felt at that

moment. This headmaster didn't know Harry, wasn't close to him. Harry, to his complete and utter shock, felt like someone had punched him in the stomach.

"I've known about the prophecy all this time," Harry told Dumbledore. "I told you about the Chamber of Secrets, even. And still you treat me like a security risk, like someone that might join Voldemort. Are gold, glory, and fame really so important to me that you think I'd dishonor my family like that? Dishonor myself and Sirius and you?"

"Sirius?" Christine asked, her large brown eyes on Harry.

"Harry," Matt said sternly, "that is not how we taught you to speak to the headmaster."

"No," Harry said, turning to the McGraths, "it's not." In fact, Matt and Christine hadn't taught him anything because there was something so basically different between the worlds that they hadn't taken him in at all. Harry walked to the doors, Christine matching pace beside him. Matt stayed, probably to talk with Dumbledore.

"We'll be at the store," Christine told Matt as the pair left the Hospital Wing. The moment the doors closed behind them. Then she addressed Harry, saying, "Tell me."

The simplicity of her request had Harry staring at her.

"No," he replied. She looked at him.

"Later."

"Maybe never," Harry said, walking around her.

"Maybe now?" Christine pushed, easily keeping pace with him. "Matt wants answers."

"He's getting them from Dumbledore," Harry said, still too angry to care about what sort of tone he used with this woman.

"I want your answers."

Opening his mouth to speak and finding no appropriately calm and coherent words, Harry shut his mouth and turned the corner, running straight into a very tired Remus Lupin. In the confusion of it all, the memories of chasing Pettigrew came back to Harry. As did the reason why Harry was chasing him and the memory of what he'd done to Sirius.

"Sorry, I should have—" Remus stopped himself, looking shocked and then hesitant. "Oh. Hello, Christine."

"Remus," Christine said, nodding at him. They were both too tired to make much of an effort, though they clearly knew each other. But Harry didn't care about what sort of smile they had for one another when Remus Lupin began walking away. Then all of the angry words and thoughts dancing in Harry's head managed to make their way out of his mouth.

"Why wouldn't you have told me?" Harry yelled, causing Remus to turn and stare at the boy.

"What?" Remus asked. Christine looked at her adopted son, concerned.

Harry wasn't to be deterred as he yelled, "Why didn't you say anything about Sirius?"

Lupin looked on, confused and guarded.

"We've talked about this, Mr. Potter, and I can assure you that I understand your opinion of my secret keeping—"

"You've hated me all these months and years because I sent him to the Kiss." Saying it aloud hurt: Harry's voice broke as tears of shame and self-hatred began to form in his throat, trying to move to his eyes. "I sent Sirius to the Dementors. Padfoot. He's—Snuffles. I'd have hated you, too, Professor, if you'd told the Aurors. But I did it and you hated me and I deserved it."

"You deserved what?" Remus asked.

“For you to hate me!” Harry yelled. Christine took a step forward but didn’t touch Harry.

“Because I sent Sirius there, but I was wrong. He’s alive. Wormtail’s alive.”

Remus looked like a powerful Confounding Hex had hit him. “What?”

“He’s alive,” Harry said, voice raw and face hurting. “He was in the castle all along. Alive as a rat. Padfoot and my parents switched Secret Keepers without telling you. They thought you were the betrayer so they switched. They switched and he turned to Voldemort and Sirius went to kill him, but he changed into the rat and cut off his own finger.”

Harry gulped down air, numb with pain to have to retell this again.

“He left Sirius on the street after sending out the curse. He did it,” Harry said, hating himself for what his other self had done. “Wormtail did it all. The least likely.”

“Why do you think this?” Lupin looked torn between asking Harry and running away, probably toward the headmaster’s office.

“He was on the Marauder’s Map,” Harry said as Christine laid a hand on his arm and turned him toward the main doors. “Ginny Weasley has it.”

Harry, Christine, and Matt came back into the Stump in silence—Harry floo-ed and the other two Apparated. Too angry to think about what it might look like, Harry cast his eyes around the living room to situate himself. Where were the stairs again? They had only lived in this home a few days at the end of summer before returning to school.

“Harry!” It took Harry a moment to recognize the voice as he turned to face the tiny, blonde Alana McGrath who launched herself at Harry. Her thin arms wrapped around his stomach and her could barely

resist pulling her off him. Didn't she know that he had sent his godfather to the Dementors? Didn't she know anything?

The moment Alana moved away from him, Harry walked past her and up the stairs to the room he hoped he could still recognize. He wanted nothing to do with these people who took a murderer into their homes. He wanted nothing to do with himself or this life he might have led.

And for two days, almost, Harry did not move. He heard conversations outside his door with voices that sounded like Christine and Matt and sometimes Alana. For the most part, though, they left him alone. It felt rather like the Dursley house except that Christine brought him meals three times a day and tea in the afternoon. While in the room, she proceeded to have one-sided conversations that always ended the same way:

"Ready to talk?" she would ask, smiling but not pressuring him.

"No," he would say, sitting on the edge of his bed and hating the fact that if Voldemort had chosen to attack Neville first, Harry himself would have destroyed Sirius and Remus. How was he supposed to talk to Christine about that feeling?

And she would leave.

But on that third day, Christine came in with a different plan at teatime.

"Come downstairs," she said, walking forward and taking him by the hand to hoist him out of bed. Harry complied, confused. In the kitchen, flour and sugar and milk were sitting quite unmagically on the counters, waiting for hands to start mixing them. It was odd to see the ingredients like that when Mrs. Weasley always mixed things magically.

"It doesn't taste good," she said, scooping up a not-quite-full cup of sugar and pouring it into a large, blue bowl on the counter, "unless it's made with human or elf hands." Harry sat on the stool by the island in

the middle of the kitchen. "I suppose centaurs might make good food, too, but I've never tried their food. Or any food that was made by a creature that wasn't human or elf. Rabbits might make excellent cake. I don't know. But I know that spells make horrible cake. Always. They peel well. They don't stir too well. They don't measure properly. Things tilt when floated. "

Harry looked on as the woman continued to babble about the things spells couldn't do correctly as she cracked a few eggs over the bowl and tossed the shells into the sink. An odd feeling was growing in Harry's chest—one he could not be expected to know: fondness. He was fond of this strange, tall, blonde woman who seemed so comfortable in her own skin.

"What was it like to raise me?" Harry was surprised to find he had asked the question, surprised to hear his own voice and his own very real curiosity. It was a question Aunt Petunia had answered often enough: annoying and expensive since he was apparently an ungrateful bottomless pit of food.

But maybe Christine, who so patiently talked to herself in his room and added ingredients without looking, might think a little differently.

"You were curious," Christine said, pouring in the milk with measuring it. "You pointed to everything and asked, 'Why?' And Matt would explain, but your 'whys' never stopped. A lot like Alana. I loved that. Matt thought it was hilarious that you were so inquisitive. He thought you'd be a Ravenclaw like him." Harry smiled a small smile. "But you've stopped asking questions."

Harry remembered the Dursleys' policy on questions that he'd grown up with: they weren't to be asked.

Christine saw his expression darken, "You all right?"

"I'm fine," Harry replied automatically.

"Liar," Christine said, adding a handful of flour into the bowl.

"What?" Harry asked, confused by her blunt accusation.

"You're not fine," Christine said, placing a flour-covered hand on Harry's cheek to make him look her in the eye. Harry instinctively leaned away from the gesture and Christine began stirring the mix, resting the bowl on the island so she could turn to face Harry.

"Recently, you sometimes look like you don't know what to think about Matt or me, and I don't understand why you suddenly think that or why you now seem uncomfortable when I hug you-- not uncomfortable like a sixteen year old, but like you don't know how to hug me back," Christine said.

"A lot's happened recently," Harry said. That was true, at least, and Christine seemed to be a human lie detector, so telling the truth was always a good decision.

"Yes, it has," Christine said, "but you don't laugh or talk to me either."

Harry felt a stab of shame. But how was he supposed to change a lifetime of habits?

Christine looked at him with sad eyes—so sad that Harry briefly wondered where her laughter had gone—and said, "You know, your mother used to hate being touched, too."

"What?" Harry asked. How was he supposed to respond to that?

"Even when Sirius would hug her, she'd smile and bare it, but then back away from him instinctively after he let her go. Your father was the one person she was comfortable with, and that was only because at the beginning he grabbed her hand and wouldn't let go," Christine said. "It was like when you and Andrew used to sit on my feet and not let go all day. I'd magically lighten you, but I couldn't go out anywhere. I loved that too."

Harry looked down at the orange, yellow, white, and red tiles that made up the floor.

"All your life, Harry, I've seen more of your father in you than I could express," Christine said, still stirring. "You walked and spoke like him;

laughed like him and wrote letters like him, but something happened to you this holiday. It's like I'm seeing sixteen year old Lily again, and it sort of hurts, but it's great, too."

"I—" Harry couldn't push the words out of his mouth and into the world. He'd never said them before—never wanted to—but he wished he had met his mother.

"I miss her, too," Christine said, pulling out her wand and sending what looked like Cooling Charms at the dough. How could she so easily understand Harry's feelings? "Lily was great. And if she had been in your place, thinking that something had to be done no matter the cost, she wouldn't have gone to find Dumbledore either. Your dad trusted Dumbledore; Lily did things personally herself."

"Did she ever personally break twenty school rules, sneak into Hogsmeade, and get suspended?" Harry muttered. Did she go back in time to save a hippogriff and a convicted murderer? Harry wondered, thinking about his third year.

"Yes," Christine said without hesitation. "She trusted her own judgment more than the opinions of adults, more than rules, more than other people, more than anything. That's why she thought James hated her for so many years: she wouldn't listen to what anyone else had to say about the matter."

"Even you?" Harry wanted to know.

"Nope," Christine said, taking the mix out of the bowl and rolling a rolling pin over it. "And after sixth year, she only ever really trusted James. Oh, and Sirius Black, I suppose."

"Sirius?" It hurt still just to hear his name.

"Well, he was their Secret Keeper," Christine said, flattening the dough.

"Did it bother you that she didn't ask you?" Harry asked, deciding not to argue with her about this point just yet.

“No,” she said, putting the pin aside and picking up cookie cutters to push into the dough and make shapes. “She told Matt what they were doing and why I shouldn’t know about it. I was pregnant with Andrew when they began preparing. They only asked one other person, far as I know, before they stuck with Sirius.”

Harry looked at this tall, thin, beautiful woman. She was what Aunt Petunia could have been to him. She was his own Mrs. Weasley. That feeling of fondness—and a desperate sadness for the chasm between the life he could have led and the life he had actually led—grew. He looked at her and said, “Sirius’s innocent.”

For the first time since he’d known her, Christine looked shocked, sad, and scared as she stopped cutting to say, “No, Harry, he’s not.”

Harry’s back unconsciously straightened. “He is.”

“No, wait. Harry, he’s guilty,” Christine said, putting down all of her cooking equipment and wiping her hands off. “He killed a lot of people, one of them a good friend of your father’s. He betrayed Lily.”

“You said you see a lot of my parents in me, right?”

She looked at him and nodded. “Yes.”

“Do you think my parents would have thought Sirius was guilty? Ever?” Harry asked, looking imploringly at her. “He was the best man at their wedding, my father’s best friend. Hell, he lived with my father for two years. And my mother liked him too. Do you really think they were that bad at judging a person’s character?”

Christine opened her mouth, closed it, and shook her head.

“I don’t either,” Harry said, “and it’s because it wasn’t Sirius.”

Christine seemed to quietly lose herself in memory, something Harry had seen Sirius and Snape and Remus do quite a bit, but never this woman.

“It would be easy to believe he was innocent,” Christine said at last, letting herself lean back onto the stool behind her. “Knowing the way he loved James and Lily—it would be easy to believe.”

Harry stared at her, a pain in his stomach he would never acknowledge. “He loved them?”

“He covered the castle in lilies and shined one hundred shoes.” Harry understood neither reference, but both obviously meant a lot to Christine, who looked suddenly older. “Your mum and dad were special, Harry, and Sirius adored them.”

Chapter 9

Walking to the loo the night after his conversation with Christine, Harry paused as he heard the McGrath adults' voices coming from their room, talking about him.

"So you believe Harry? About Sirius being innocent?" Matt asked.

"I do," Christine replied. In a world of strangers and people expecting a funny, annoying, attention-seeking Harry, Christine's trust in Harry was like a catching the snitch after he'd fallen off his broom: it made the crash hurt a lot less.

"I know we had doubts at first, but—" Matt trailed off, as if to say they had accepted it. "It's been fifteen years." Regret and fear laced Matt's words.

"There was no trial," Christine said. Harry hated the Ministry. Hated Crouch.

"There wasn't a trial for Bellatrix Lestrange, either." Matt's soft, logical words hurt.

"True." Christine sounded so sad right then, as sad as she had when she looked at Harry with her memories in her eyes that afternoon. "But the lilies."

"It always comes back to that, doesn't it?" Matt asked. How many lilies could there have been to make such an impression?

"And the cats," Christine said. "Those cats loved Sirius."

"Those cats loved everyone."

"They didn't acknowledge Tracy," Christine said.

"Can we please not talk about Tracy?" Matt asked. Harry might have heard the name Tracy before from Matt or Christine, but couldn't remember when.

"You'd rather talk about Sirius?" Christine asked. Harry wouldn't. Harry would rather talk about Pettigrew. That bastard.

"I'd rather think about what's wrong with our son," Matt said. His words sent a jolt through Harry. Was he talking about him? The other Harry, by all accounts, had always called them Matt and Christine. Despite that, did they consider themselves his parents?

What a prat that other Harry must have been to belittle and complain about people taking care of him. Yet this Harry could not claim to be any better. He had never had parents. Never had an adult besides Dumbledore to guide him. If he were honest with himself, Harry would admit that it made him deeply uncomfortable and agitated when adults tried to step into his life like parents. But that was because he was sixteen and perfectly able, after all of these years living alone with the Dursleys, to take care of himself. What would it have been like to grow up in this home, with these parents, with these siblings? Why wouldn't Harry have loved it?

"You don't believe him," Christine was saying when Harry started listening again.

"I'm skeptical," Matt acknowledged. "Someone might be tricking him or confusing him. We don't know what that person did to him in the tunnel."

"You don't think he made this up, right?"

"Never," Matt said. "Not something like this."

Harry wondered if his other self made up stories a lot. He also wondered why no one beat up his other self. As far as Harry could tell, not-marked-Harry was a complete git.

"He's changed," Christine said. Harry leaned in closer. "He used to love the way Alana worshiped him. Now it just makes him uncomfortable. He talks to her like an adult. He and Naomi were almost close in Italy. He told Professor Dumbledore to bugger off. He spoke to Remus like he didn't hate him and didn't want Remus to hate him."

“Remus is a good man,” Matt said. “The only reason you two are awkward is because of the friction between Harry and him.”

“I know that,” Christine said, “and Harry’s a good wizard too, but he used to blame Remus for what happened to his parents. What changed?”

“Maybe Harry’s growing up,” Matt suggested.

“Or maybe he isn’t the same boy I raised these last fifteen years.” An impossible fear came over Harry: that Christine would guess the truth. But he pushed that aside. There was no way.

“Do you not like the new Harry?”

“I like the person he is right now. I like that he’s becoming so much like Lily.”

“Then maybe we ought to stop questioning it and just accept the change,” Matt said. “He is sixteen, after all, and that type tends to change a bit.”

“Talk to him.”

“He’ll come to me when he’s ready.”

“He won’t. Not anymore. Please.” There was a long pause as Harry settled back on his haunches.

“All right,” Matt said at last, and Harry left.

The knock on his door was not a surprise. Matt coming in only after Harry welcomed him wasn’t a surprise either. But Harry had expected Matt to lie to him about his reasons for coming, so when Matt pulled out the chair from the desk, sat on it, and said, “Christine asked me to talk to you,” that was a surprise.

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Because she thinks you’re changing, I suppose, and that you might need someone to confide in,” Matt replied.

Harry sat on the edge of his bed, feet flat on the ground, facing Matt. “I’m fine.”

“We weren’t doubting that,” Matt said easily. And it sort of drove Harry crazy, Matt’s calm, easy disposition. It was a lot like Christine, but with a more down-to-earth tone to it. Why didn’t he just say what he was thinking? Why hadn’t he yet yelled at Harry for being suspended? Why hadn’t he done something?

“What did Dumbledore tell you?” Harry asked.

Matt leaned back to rest his back against the chair. “He told me you attacked another student after sneaking off campus once and then proceeded to sneak off again in pursuit of someone you said was Peter Pettigrew.”

“It was Pettigrew,” Harry said.

“Remus Lupin owled me this morning,” Matt said. “He agrees with you and went to Dumbledore with what must have been rather convincing evidence.”

“He went to Dumbledore?” Harry repeated, shocked. Even after all that Harry had done—after Harry had destroyed Sirius and broken the Marauder’s secrets and everything—still he trusted Harry’s ranting enough to go to Dumbledore. Remus was by far the better man.

“Yes,” Matt said. “He did.”

“Then—then why am I still suspended?” Harry asked, standing up and pacing. Matt remained seated, watching Harry with dull blue eyes.

“You attacked a student and snuck off grounds twice,” Matt said. “I believe that warrants a bit of punishment.”

“Are they searching for Pettigrew? Are they hunting?” Harry asked, desperate. Matt nodded. “Then why aren’t I there? I could help. I could find him. I could—”

“You’re sixteen, Harry, and fully trained Aurors are—”

“But they don’t understand! They don’t care,” Harry said, sitting down to look Matt in the eye, which had the effect of calming him a great deal. “He betrayed my parents. Mine. No one else understands.”

“A very qualified Unspeakable is leading this endeavor. A woman who cares about this enough,” Matt said. “Perhaps even too much, if that’s possible.”

Harry was not satisfied. “Who? Why would she care so much?”

“She was your mother’s best friend,” Matt replied, and Harry sat down again, defeated, hurting.

“I don’t even know who that is,” Harry said bitterly.

Matt sighed. “Her name is Gertrude Wrightman, and I promise you that she knows what she’s doing.”

“Why don’t I know her?” Harry asked before he could consider the fact that he might know her in this world.

Matt said, “She’s a very private person, and I think she wanted to give you some space growing up. She visited when you were young and had us over to dinner a few times, but for the most part she spends her time at the hospital and the Department of Mysteries.”

How could Harry not have known his own mother’s best friend? How could he have no idea who she was or even what she looked like? Why had Dumbledore decided Aunt Petunia was the one to take care of him? The McGraths answered Harry’s questions, treated him like a son, and respected him. How much did blood matter when there were people in the world that willingly called themselves family?

“Even if Gertrude weren’t heading the case, it would be given high priority,” Matt said. “The idea that the Ministry was wrong about Sirius Black is horrific. It’s difficult for me to even consider, knowing what he suffered.”

“Knowing what I made him suffer,” Harry corrected angrily. The distance from the bed to the chair was a little less than a meter, but Matt’s gaze seemed to bridge and close that gap. It seemed to seek Harry out and hold him steady in its earthy, calm, understanding, and down-to-earth way.

“Knowing what I made him suffer too,” Matt said, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “You may have sent him to the Kiss, but I never visited him in prison, never appealed to the Ministry for a trial, never considered the idea that he wasn’t the Secret Keeper. I blamed him for everything without question simply because it was nice, almost, to have a scapegoat. So I never tried to know the truth. We’re all to blame here, Harry.”

Harry’s hands shook as emotion began to overwhelm him. Who was Matt but to help him learn to live with himself instead of trying to absolve Harry as adults tried to do—which irritated and angered Harry? Who was Matt McGrath to share the blame and responsibility of what had happened?

“Why did you hate him?” Harry asked through his tight throat.

“The Longbottoms and the Potters were legends for the light side,” Matt said, leaning back again. “They both escaped Voldemort three times. They were the example everyone held up when others began to give up. People would say, ‘If the Potters and the Longbottoms can escape three times, we have a chance.’”

“Fat lot of good three times did them,” Harry said angrily. “Four would have been better.”

“If Neville hadn’t lived, if the war hadn’t ended right then, I’m sure we would be under Voldemort’s control now,” Matt said.

“That’s not true.” Harry glared at him.

"People would have given up," Matt said simply. "The Longbottoms and the Potters were the last hope of the light side. If they'd been defeated, I have no doubt that we all would have given up. I know we don't talk about it a lot, but Voldemort was winning, Harry, when Neville stopped him. The last remaining stronghold was Hogwarts. Everyone was running or hiding. Only Death Eaters were having children. Why do you think there are so many in your year?"

But how could that be true? Was Neville really that important? If everything had been going so horribly, wouldn't Dumbledore have done something other than rely on a prophecy about a baby? Wouldn't he have formed an army? But, Harry realized, Dumbledore had started an army. For what else were the Order members if not Dumbledore's own soldiers? They were the secret first line of defense. And this world's Neville, Harry supposed, was the last.

"That's too much to ask of Neville," Harry said, feeling an odd surge of need in his stomach. Need to protect Neville. Need to take part in this action. Need to make sure the people he cared about were protected.

Matt's face looked questioning. "We haven't asked anything of Neville."

"But you will," Harry said, mentally running through this world's Neville. "And he might not be ready."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Harry," Matt said.

Harry looked up at him. "I know, but that's all right."

"After all he's suffered, I'm sure you're not jealous of Neville, right?" Matt asked.

Harry, who had been reminding himself of his desperate need to find a replacement, felt shocked by Matt's question. "No. He just needs to protect so many people, I want to be sure he can do it, or find someone who can in his place."

“And you don’t secretly think that person ought to be you?” Matt asked, giving Harry a long look.

“No,” Harry said. “They need someone really strong.”

For a moment that felt like hours, Matt’s eyes dimmed and then lit up and he smiled at Harry.

“You really are turning into your mother, aren’t you?” Matt asked, shaking his head.

“Excuse me?”

“There are a lot of times when the world doesn’t work out the way we want it to,” Matt said, standing and walking over to Harry’s desk to pick up a quill and rearrange some things. “I took it for granted that your mum, Christine, and I would be friends forever, raising Andy and you together. We all wanted the two of you to be good friends.”

“We are good friends,” Harry said. At least, he thought they were.

“You’re best friends,” Matt said, tapping the quill one last time before turning to meet Harry’s gaze, “and that’s wonderful, but the cost was more than we ever imagined.”

“The cost?”

“Your mother. Your father,” Matt said shortly. Broken silence engulfed Harry and Matt and that bed and that chair. It filled the room with a thousand memories of people who shaped Harry’s life, even if he had never met them. “I should have known it was too much to hope for that we might all live happily ever after.”

“Why?” Harry wanted to know. “Why couldn’t everyone—Sirius, Remus, my mum and dad—have lived?”

Matt looked disapprovingly at Harry and said, “I know you’ve only ever seen your mother and father in the hospital, but you can’t act like they’re dead. Even there, with all they’ve suffered, they’re still big people.”

“What?” Harry asked, sucking in air through his clenched teeth.

“Your mother was always too important, too powerful to live a normal life,” Matt said. He didn’t understand what Harry meant. Didn’t understand. Had he just said—no. No. It was too much. Too much to hope. Too much to believe. Too much.

“My parents are dead,” Harry said, irrationally terrified.

“Don’t say that—” Matt looked concerned as he too stood.

“They’re dead!” Harry yelled, standing up and shaking his head at Matt. “They’re dead! Don’t lie!”

“Harry?” Christine was standing at the door, looking confused and upset and so very, very worried.

“They’re not alive!” Harry screamed. “They’re not! If they were, why aren’t they here? Why aren’t they here?”

As Harry continued to scream and yell and protest, Christine McGrath walked forward and embraced Harry. She pulled him to her even after he shoved her away. Even after his bigger, stronger body refused to be calmed. And seeing Matt looking at Harry with worried, loving eyes, Harry broke down for what felt like the thousandth time in this new world.

He cried away his anger and sadness and doubt. He cried until the absolutely terrifying idea of his mother being alive settled into his mind permanently, and he finally understood why everyone cautioned that people ought to be careful what they wish for.

Harry did not want to meet his mother. Didn’t want to see her in the hospital. Didn’t want to touch her. He couldn’t. For as long as he could remember it had been his greatest dream, yet the idea of actually meeting and speaking to his parents scared Harry more than Voldemort, more than dying, more than fear.

Because what if she hated him? What if she was just like every other adult he had ever known, a disappointment? What if Harry wasn't what she expected? What if, after he touched her, he couldn't bear to leave her again?

Things went back to the way they were: Harry in his room, silent; Christine bringing meals; owls bringing letters Harry refused to open as he tried so desperately to block a piece of information that threatened to destroy him. And once again it took only a brief encounter, three days later, to change it all.

A small knock. A small head, peeking around a barely opened door.

"Harry?" Alana asked. Harry stared at her, not knowing what to say, unwilling to lift his head off his pillow. The tiny blonde girl walked into the room. "Mum says you're angry and that I shouldn't visit, but you're not angry, are you?"

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but found himself unable to form the words. How could he tell a six year old about the pain of being within a foot of your greatest dream and hating yourself for being too terrified to reach it?

"Mum says you don't want to see your mum, but I thought Mum was your mum," Alana said, walking over to stand in front of him with her perfect child-posture. "Why don't you want to see Mum? I want to see Mum. She makes me sandwiches."

Harry almost smiled, turning his eyes to the small girl, who was quiet only a moment.

"Will you go flying with me now?" Alana asked. '

Harry smiled his slow, sad smile at the exuberant child. "You want to fly?"

"Yes," Alana said eagerly. "Bridget's brothers fly with her but they don't go to Hogwarts and so they're home all the time because

they're old, but you're not so you leave and I only get to fly with you in the summer and Naomi says I can fly all I want when I go to school, but that's not for forever and I want to fly now."

"Do you know how to fly?" Harry asked softly, curious. Could someone so small reach such great heights?

"Yes," Alana said. "Aunt Tracy said I was good, but she doesn't come over a lot and Stevie said he couldn't fly with me yet because he's too young, but you're not too young, and you're home now."

Flying was one of the few times Harry really felt comfortable. It was one of those rare occasions when he could forget prophecies and switched worlds and secret keepers and dead mothers reborn. The sky was a place of instinct for Harry, where he could go to live, at last, without anyone telling him how. It seemed incredible to Harry that this tiny girl would ask of him such a simple thing, that he return home to the sky, that he do the one thing he loved. With large brown eyes, Alana looked at him hopefully, as if she knew he answer would be 'no' and was just desperate for him to say 'yes' instead.

"I'd love to fly with you," Harry said, not even realizing he said it. Nor did he realize, on a conscious level, how happy the thought of flying made him. Instead, still fighting off this world's demons, Harry stood and let Alana take him by the thumb to drag him insistently downstairs and out into the yard where there were an assortment of brooms in a shed—which was really no shed at all inside, but rather a locker room—including, to Harry's amazement, a Firebolt with an inscription in the handle.

Harry Potter – Chaser, Junior National Team, 1995.

So he hadn't been given it by his godfather. Great. Yet another reminder that Sirius wasn't in this world. If he hadn't respected Quidditch and that broom so much, Harry would have thrown it into the wall and walked away.

"Ready?" Alana asked. Harry looked over at her where she stood in the corner of the room swinging her toy broom, a large grin on her face. Harry's mood lightened.

“Ready,” Harry said, walking out of the shed, Firebolt in hand.

“Watch this!” Alana called out, running forward and jumping on her broom with abandon, taking off like a rocket... little less than a meter above the ground. Harry’s smile grew. She was so happy there on her toy broom—feet able to touch the ground if she tried—just so long as she was flying.

“Are you watching?” Alana asked.

Harry nodded, only to realize that she wasn’t looking at him. “Yes.”

Alana turned to circle around Harry as she spoke. “Mum said you wouldn’t fly with me, but I said you would. You always fly with me. Will you let me ride with you?”

“Ride with me?”

“On your Firebolt like on my birthday?” Alana asked. It was strange, but at that moment something redeemable came forward about the other Harry’s character: he seemed to truly love and look out for Alana. And in return, she seemed to genuinely like him as a person and think of him as her brother. Maybe love him.

Why was that so unsettling to Harry?

And why was the idea of his mother alive and in a hospital too overwhelming? Why wasn’t he running to see her? Why, instead, was he desperately searching for a way to go back to his world?

He had gone through all of his lists, everyone he could think of, and crossed out every name. Every name. There was always a reason to doubt them. To think they would tell. Who would never tell? Who would--

And then Harry remembered something Christine said a few days ago.

His parents had asked someone first. Leaving Alana alone to sprint to the kitchen, Harry found Christine sitting at a table, watching the place in the yard where Alana was slowly flying toward the house and toward Harry.

“Who was it?” Harry asked without preamble.

“Who was what?” Christine asked, brown eyes locked on him though she didn’t show an surprise about the abrupt start of the conversation.

“Who did my parents ask to be their Secret Keeper before Sirius?” Harry asked, trying to push away the painful memory that they weren’t dead, trying to push away the questions of why Sirius was in prison anyway.

“Oh, your mother’s sister: Petunia,” Christine replied.

And everything clicked into place.

Chapter 10

Family

Suddenly Harry realized that of course his aunt would never have told another soul about the other world. She wouldn't have written Harry about it. While he wouldn't say he'd "trust" her with a secret, he would most certainly believe she'd never mention knowing about anything abnormal in the world.

"I'd like to see her today," Harry said.

"Your mother?" Christine asked, shocking Harry out of his thoughts. He opened his mouth to reply, but his mind was too busy processing the idea of Petunia as the secret keeper to form really coherent sentences. But at least his anger was gone—stolen by a six year old girl with soft blonde hair flying in the courtyard outside—and replaced with a desperate sort of purpose: the need to find his secret keeper and change history back.

"No. Aunt Petunia," Harry said, annoyed with himself for being unable to meet his mother, but knowing that he simply did not want to see her.

"All right," Christine said, standing. "We'll leave in ten minutes."

"What?" Harry asked.

"I need to just get Alana ready and we'll be on our way."

"I could go myself."

"I know," Christine said, walking to the back door, "but I want to come with you. Your aunt can be difficult."

She left, and Harry watched her walk up to Alana and clap her hands to get the girl's attention. Alana looked up at her mother and grinned, turned and sped off in the opposite direction. At least 'sped off' in the sense that she went as fast as that toy broom could go. Christine smiled and gave chase, purposefully missing when she had the

chance to catch the girl until finally she plucked her six-year-old daughter off the broom and into her arms. The pair laughed as Christine spun her around for a bit before they came inside.

“But why do I have to stop flying? Harry said he’d fly with me,” Alana said when Christine put her down, looking first at her mother and then at Harry.

“Maybe he’ll fly with you later,” Christine said. Alana looked at Harry hopefully, and he nodded slightly. She beamed. “We’re going to see his aunt now.”

“Aunt Tracy?” Alana asked.

“No, sweets. She’s just Harry’s aunt,” Christine said, leading her to the stairs and looking back at Harry. “You’re going like that, are you?”

Harry looked down and saw that he was wearing three-day old outfit.

“By why does Harry have an aunt that I don’t?” Alana asked as she raced up the stairs, Christine following behind her. She really didn’t understand that Harry wasn’t her brother, did she?

Harry looked down at his outfit and acknowledged Aunt Petunia had put him in much worse outfits in his life, but Harry knew that if he was going to convince her to talk to him– and that included letting him into her home after the neighbors saw him – then he’d have to look like a very fashionable Muggle.

After writing Matt a quick note to explain where they were going, Harry, Christine, and Alana flooded to just outside London and took a taxi the rest of the way to Privet Drive. Harry had been worried about how to explain to Christine that he knew the address and directions, but she had surprised him by knowing right where to go.

“How do you know where Aunt Petunia lives?” Harry asked Christine. They were sitting in the back of the taxi with Alana between them, swinging her legs.

"We still write her," Christine said, "to send her pictures of you and things."

"Why didn't I know that?" Harry asked.

"I don't know." Christine turned to look at him and shrugged. "I thought you did."

That's right. This world's Harry might have known this information. He turned to look out the window and think about what he would say to his aunt, how he would convince her not just to admit that she knew him, but to also realize that they needed to leave this world. Harry didn't know how, exactly, his aunt would transport them to another world, but unless that Robert bloke was lying, she ought to be able to change something.

It wasn't until the houses started becoming uniform that he began to feel a twinge in his stomach akin to anxiety. It made him angry and upset. Why was he at all nervous about talking to the woman who raised him?

As the taxi pulled to a stop, Harry realized a whole new problem.

"You don't have to come inside with me," he told Christine and Alana. Christine got out of the car and Alana followed, though she grabbed Harry's hand and held it while Christine paid the driver.

"But we will," Christine said as the taxi pulled away.

"I saw a park," Alana whined. "Can we go to the park?"

"Maybe later," Christine said. "For now, we're going to have a very serious conversation with Harry's aunt."

Alana's face fell into a pout. "I want to go to the park."

"I know," Christine said, walking forward and lifting her daughter into her arms before turning to Harry. "Lead the way."

Harry almost wanted to open his mouth to suggest again that they not come in, but he decided against it. If this went according to plan, they wouldn't remember this world at all in a few minutes. Such was his optimism. The walkway leading to Number 4 was just as Harry remembered it: petunias lining the perfectly mud-free red bricks. Harry wondered whom they had hired to keep it clean since they didn't have him. Not that he wondered for very long, mind, because the one peculiarity on the property took up most of his attention.

You see, sitting on the very same wall a cat-form McGonagall had once occupied, was the bookseller Robert.

"You," Harry said accusingly.

"Robert?" Christine said at the same time, sounding very confused. Harry looked over at the tall blonde woman and she at him. Alana looked back and forth between them as Christine put her down and faced Robert, asking, "What are you doing here?"

Robert, a youngish looking man with a well-kept appearance, nodded at Harry. After a moment, Christine looked at Harry, who shrugged awkwardly.

Christine looked back and forth between them two more times, looking remarkably like her daughter as she did so, and finally said, "Alana and I will be at the park after you're done."

"Yes!" Alana exclaimed, oblivious to the tension in the group. "The park!"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Because you've probably made a really big mistake," Christine said, taking her daughter's hand and smiling a strained smile at Harry. "Tap three times on your watch and I'll be here."

Then they left, that tall willowy woman and her pixie-like daughter, who ran ahead of her mother only to return a moment later. Christine sportingly tried not to step on the cracks in the sidewalk when Alana

told her not to, and Harry wondered briefly why exactly he wanted to leave this world.

“Made a decision, have you?” Robert asked, pulling Harry’s thoughts away from almost-family and back into reality. Or almost-reality, at least.

“Yes,” Harry said, though he wasn’t really all that sure. He looked over Number 4 and its front lawn. He spent all his life cutting the grass on either side of that walkway. Spent his sleeping hours in that normal home, under those normal stairs. Spent his days at the school with no friends avoiding his stupid, fat cousin’s slow fist. He was no hero. He was just average Harry. Always had been. If only Hagrid had believed him all those years ago in that shack on the rock.

“You don’t know who you want to replace you yet, do you?” Robert said, hands in the pockets of his very Muggle trousers. Come to think of it, Harry hadn’t ever seen him wearing robes. Not even in his store. How odd.

“I don’t care who replaces me,” Harry said clearly, walking past him up to the front door. “I need to talk to her.”

“So you haven’t learned anything,” Robert said. Harry ignored him. “Teenagers are all the same, aren’t they? Think they can just ignore the rules.”

Harry couldn’t take it anymore and he spun around. “There aren’t any rules except the ones you made up!”

“Somebody has to make up the rules,” Robert said condescendingly, standing quite slowly, “and part of my rules is that you have to know why you want the world changed in a certain way.”

“That’s a stupid rule.”

Robert shook his finger at Harry. “Hey now, let’s not start insulting my rules or I’ll have to start insulting your ridiculous hair and it’ll become a slippery slope of meanness.”

It took a lot of energy for Harry not take out his wand and hex this flippant man across the road. "I just want out of here."

"Why?"

"Because this isn't right."

Robert smiled and irritated Harry in the process. "You're scared."

"I'm not scared," Harry snapped.

"Sure you are," Robert said, leaning against that wall again. "You're scared of talking to your aunt, you're scared of what you did to Sirius, scared of Remus' reaction, scared that Dumbledore doesn't trust you. You're scared of the fact that in this world you were happy and turned out to be such an unlikable boy. But most of all, you're just terrified to see your mother and father."

Harry's fist hit Robert in the face before either wizard had the time to consider the action.

And it hurt. A lot. Not Robert, who staggered a bit, but more so Harry, who hadn't locked his wrist or tightened his fingers enough.

But it was worth it.

"This is your mess, and I'm fixing it," Harry said, turning to finish walking to the front door as he shook out his hand to relieve the pain.

"And yet you still don't understand why it is that this world isn't right," Robert said, shaking his head. "You really are thick, aren't you, boy?"

"Change this all back," Harry said, choosing to try to convince him one more time before he faced his aunt and the challenge she represented.

"Why?" Robert asked, his cheek not even slightly pink from the punch.

“Because this isn’t the life I was supposed to live. This”—Harry gestured as if to say the entire world—“isn’t how anything is supposed to be.”

Robert tilted his head. “Voldemort’s not back.”

“Yes he is! These people are only too thick to realize it,” Harry snapped, thinking about the disappearances the Prophet mentioned and no one paid attention to, “and they won’t accept his return until it’s too late.”

“You don’t need to convince me,” Robert said. “You need to convince the one person you trust. But I’ll tell you right now: you’re not going to convince anyone with your ‘because this isn’t right’ argument. Pick a leader to take your place and convince the world.”

“You’re useless,” Harry said, giving up on him and turning to the Dursley house.

Harry knocked on the door. The bronze 4 in the middle of the door shined and the mail slot lacked any sign that Uncle Vernon had nailed it shut six years before. The welcome mat had no dirt on it – no doubt Aunt Petunia had vacuumed it recently—and even the stones in front of the house looked clean.

The door opened to reveal the face of the woman who had raised him.

“How many I help”—a look of shock crossed Petunia’s face briefly and Harry only caught it because it was the look she used to get after the principal called her into the office to tell her that Harry had done something strange—“you?”

“Hello, Aunt Petunia,” Harry said, meeting her eyes. Her mouth set.

“You have the wrong house. I don’t have any nephews.” Petunia made to close the door, but Harry put out a hand to stop it from shutting. Petunia’s scared eyes met his.

“Move your hand,” she said, a bit shrilly.

"If you don't let me in, I'll make a scene," Harry said, knowing how his aunt valued keeping up appearances in the neighborhood. "I'll go next door and tell Mrs. Bolingbrook that your sister was a witch and that you are ashamed of her."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Petunia set her jaw and tried to shut the door again. Had she always been this stubborn?

"I know you know who I am," Harry said. At Petunia's hard look, Harry pressed his point. "Invite me in, Aunt Petunia, or I will go to the neighbors." She didn't respond. "And I'll go to Smeltings." At last she showed some recognition and emotion, eyes widening and mouth dropping open.

"You wouldn't."

"Invite me in," Harry said, knowing he couldn't convince her to admit to being the secret keeper on the threshold to her home. Petunia glared at him before peeking behind him as if to see if anyone was watching, and then let him in. It didn't surprise Harry in any way to know that Robert had made himself scarce. Without thinking about it, Harry wiped his feet before entering, not even recognizing this as a manner Petunia had instilled in him.

The house looked exactly as he remembered, right down to the cupboard under the stairs and the slightly dented painting of Aunt Marge at the end of the hall. His life had really not made an impact on this house. In fact, it seemed that his existence hadn't changed a thing about Number 4. He'd be sad about that fact if it weren't for, well, the fact that he didn't care.

He walked into the living room and settled into the armchair in the corner. Aunt Petunia sat on the couch, hands folded in her lap and lips pursed. The carpet was the same shade of dull grey. At least Harry now had proof that his aunt's claims that his living with them had ruined their lives were false.

"So what do you want?" Petunia asked in clipped tones. Her collarbone was more prominent than Harry remembered.

“Tell me what you remember,” Harry said. In fact, all of her was pointer. She was thinner, Harry realized.

“We don’t have any money, if that’s what your after.” The way she easily ignored his words and request were impressive, but Harry had been ignored by his aunt since he was born, practically, and knew how to stop that.

Harry leaned forward. “I made a wish and changed the course of history—”

“Don’t know what you’re—”

“And it changed everything, including you, Aunt Petunia,” Harry said. His aunt was mouthing commands for him to leave. “A man made the entire world change and now only you have the power to change it back.”

“Get out!” Petunia yelled, obviously shaken as she stood. “I’m not a freak like you.”

“No. There’s only one person who remembers, the person I would trust most to keep the secret.”

“Get out!” Petunia said, pointing a shaking finger toward the door. “We don’t approve this sort of talk in this house.”

“I know that,” Harry replied, stubbornly sitting. “And you know I know that because you raised me, Aunt Petunia.”

“I did no such thing, you impertinent boy!” Petunia said, still shaking. Harry finally stood.

“You recognized me the moment you opened the door,” Harry said, shocked by how much taller he was than his aunt. He was about the same height as Matt and Christine. Harry was surprised to find that the thought of Christine and Matt calmed his nerves.

Petunia set her mouth and moved to the front door, opening it and motioning for him to leave. Harry followed her into the hall, but refused to leave.

"You recognized me," Harry said.

"Get out."

"I lived in that cupboard right there," Harry said, pointing to the room in question, "until I received my school letter and you moved me into the spare bedroom upstairs with all of Dudley's old toys—"

"You've been spying on us!" Petunia shrieked, shaking. "How do you know about the rooms in our home? Are they watching us?"

"No, no one's watching you," Harry said, shaking his head in disgust, "and I know you don't want to admit any connection to magic"—his aunt shuddered and opened her mouth to scream but Harry kept talking—"but I need you to admit that you know me."

"I don't know you," Petunia said.

"I know you're the one!" Harry exclaimed. Petunia shut the door after glancing to make sure no one had heard his exclamation. "You're the only person in this entire world I would trust to keep this secret from everyone. You probably even lied to yourself about it and said it was not true, it was an evil bit of imagination." Harry knew how she disapproved of imagination.

"I don't know any secrets." Petunia looked livid.

"What about the fact that you have a sister?" Harry asked viciously. His aunt paled even further and reached a hand out to rest on the umbrella stand. "Yes, that's right. You're good at keep secrets. No one but you and Uncle Vernon even knew my mother existed. Hell, I lived in this house and you pretended like I didn't exist. I trust you not to tell a soul about what you know."

"You don't know me and I don't know you!" Her eyes had a wild look to them reminiscent of the night in the shack when she'd talked about

her sister for the first time in ten years. Harry knew that if he just kept pushing, she would confess.

“You recognized me when you opened the door—”

“I thought you were a hooligan!”

“You knew I was my mother’s son!” Harry exclaimed. “You saw me and you knew exactly who I was. You knew my name and—”

“How could I not?” Petunia shrieked, flailing her arms through the air in anger as she advanced on Harry. The ten-year-old boy in him wanted to back away. The sixteen-year-old in him hated that side of himself and stood firmly. “You look just like him, that useless man my sister up and married. I thought you were him, but then I saw your eyes and I knew who you were.” She looked disgusted as her own pale blue eyes swept over him. “And I knew that that woman who took you from me had failed and you needed something. I knew she was a good-for-nothing the moment she walked in and just took you.”

“Don’t you dare insult Christine,” Harry hissed.

“I knew you needed money or help of some kind,” Petunia said, shaking her finger at him, “but we’re not giving you anything. We have no obligation to you. None.”

Harry shook his head, angry and stubborn. “You must remember.”

“I remember the week we had you in our home,” Petunia said, shaking her hand at him. “Your mother went crazy and we got landed with you and no support. I was glad when that woman came. Relieved.”

Harry tried to trick her in to admitting she remembered the real timeline. “What about when Aunt Marge was blown up?”

Petunia shrieked again and then yelled, “You blew up Vernon’s sister?”

“That’s not what I—”

“Murderer!” Petunia yelled, backing into the wall. And looking into her terrified eyes – eyes that had never looked at Harry with anything but distaste – Harry knew that she was not the woman who raised him, not the woman who remembered Harry as a five year old during a lightening storm trying to come into her bedroom. Didn’t remember yelling at him to leave and locking the door. No. She was just a woman now with a nephew who looked like her brother-in-law.

But Harry couldn’t just accept that someone else might be the secret keeper. Aunt Petunia was perfect. She’d never tell anyone. Probably not even him. How was he going to convince her to open up? Maybe first he ought to convince her he was telling the truth as he had with Hermione. So he opened his mouth to speak, and shut it.

“What, murderer?” Aunt Petunia snapped. Harry tried to think. With Hermione he had listed all of the information he knew about her. He had told her things that only a best friend could know. He lived with this tall, dark-haired woman for ten years straight and now summer holidays, he woke to her rapping knuckles and slept after she sent him to bed, he ate at her table with her polished silverware and watched her wash the dishes so thoroughly.

But what did he know about her?

“I made a wish in June that I be normal,” Harry began, looking at his aunt. “No matter how you hoped I would just die and be taken off your hands, you have to respect that I wanted a normal life.”

“Normal?” she hissed. “What would you ever know about normal, freak?”

“I knew enough to know I wanted something like it,” Harry said, “and so I wished that something be taken from me that made me different, and a stranger made it happen.”

“Wishes don’t come true.” No, Petunia had never approved of imagination. She had never approved of magic or strangeness. She had never approved of Harry, really.

Harry ignored her. "This whole world was made because I made that wish. And instead of growing up with you, I grew up with Matt and Christine"—Harry saw a spark of recognition in his aunt's eye—"but I don't remember them. I remember you. And Aunt Marge with her disgusting dogs dirtying your kitchen and Dudley and Pierce at school. And Dudley's stupid smelting stick."

"You have been spying on us!"

"No, I lived with you." Harry wanted to hit a wall. "Why won't you admit that you know me?"

"Because I don't! You were in my house for a week as baby and then that woman came and took you and ignored what my sister wanted for you!" Petunia said, gesturing wildly toward the outside.

Wait. What? "What does my mother have to do with this?"

"She wanted you here!" Petunia exclaimed, pointing into her living room. "But that woman came and took you away and I get letters every month about how you are and I burn them as quickly as I can!"

"When I was here, you hated me," Harry said. "What do you care if I'm gone?"

"You're a freak, just like her!" Petunia exclaimed, but then took a deep, sad breath and said, almost scornfully, "But you're family."

Harry shook his head at her. "Admit that you know me. I know that you do."

"I don't know you, but if you'd have lived here, I would have fixed you, gotten rid of that dangerous business."

Harry's voice caught. "You couldn't change me. You tried."

"I could have!" Petunia exclaimed.

"Magic doesn't just go away."

Petunia opened her front door and looked at Harry. "Leave. Leave before I phone the police."

Harry shook his head. "I can't make the world right unless you admit that you remember."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Petunia said, and when Harry opened his mouth to begin arguing again, a third voice broke in.

"It's not her, Harry." Harry's head whipped around to spot Robert standing on the walkway, hands still in his pockets.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, feeling suddenly dizzy.

"It's not her," Robert repeated. Harry wanted to kill that man.

Harry looked at his thin, angry aunt who was glaring at him something awful. He asked, "Why wouldn't you have told me before?"

"Because you wouldn't believe me unless you'd talked to her. So now you have and you should listen to me," Robert said, shifting from his right foot to his left. Surrounded by the pale blue sky, he lost the sharp edges and sort of looked like he faded into the background. Harry looked at his aunt, silently begging her to admit that she knew Harry and a world in which she raised him. Instead, she told him to go away again.

"This is the way I have chosen to live my life," Petunia said. "My sister never understood that and you're obviously just as stupid." Harry glared first at Robert, then at his aunt, and walked out of that house, seething. The door slammed shut.

"Who is it?" Harry hissed, walking up to Robert.

"Who is what?" Robert asked, still looking so calm and put together. Harry hated him. "What are you going to do, Harry? Hit me again?"

"Why were you here if Aunt Petunia wasn't my secret keeper?" Harry asked angrily.

“Because I knew you would come here,” Robert answered. “And I needed to remind you that you need to know both the secret keeper and the person you want to replace yourself with.”

“You are a shitty wish-granter,” Harry said, walking past him, down the walkway and toward the park.

“I’m actually really good at it,” Robert said, casually turning and following him with long strides. “I have awards and the admiration of my peers to verify that.”

“Why couldn’t you have just let me grow up with my parents?” Harry asked bitterly, turning left on the road.

Harry glared at him so he shrugged. “What do you want me to say, Harry? That I’m sorry? That I should have sent you to your parents? You’re never satisfied.”

“I would have been satisfied with my family.” Harry looked over at Mrs. Figg’s house and saw two kids playing in the front yard. “I would have been happy with my parents.”

“Have you even seen them yet?” Robert asked rather pointedly. Harry glared again. “Just curious. I mean, you’re a floo grate away and you can’t bring yourself to go, but you wanted me to throw you into their home? You’re not thinking this through, my boy. You had a fit when you woke up with strangers. Can you imagine what it would have been like to go into a kitchen and find your dead parents and Sirius chuckling away over breakfast?”

A pang went through Harry’s heart; he walked faster.

“So instead you put me in a world where they’re crazy and I killed Sirius?” Harry asked.

“That’s a melodramatic way of putting it.” Robert shrugged, taking his left hand out of his pocket and flipping a coin in the air. “I put you in a place where you were happy.”

“I’m not happy here.” Harry almost reached out and smacked the coin out of the air, but decided that would be ridiculous.

“You could be,” Robert said, catching the coin and looking at Harry. “If this was the world you chose and you wanted all these memories, you could be that junior national league Quidditch player.”

“A completely self-centered, attention-seeking hypocrite?”

“A boy who made people—professors, peers, adoptive family, and strangers—laugh aloud all day, who dated a girl he loved, and had best friends that adored him,” Robert said. “A boy whose greatest wish was to be you.”

Harry mentally recoiled. “In other words, a thoughtless prat.”

“Maybe.” Robert smiled a small smile. “I like you, Harry, I do. You could have asked for anything: for power and fame and money and women. You could have asked that Tom Riddle were never born or something evil like that, but you looked up at the sky and asked only that your friends have the protector they deserve.”

Robert reached a hand out to pat Harry on the shoulder. On reflex, Harry avoided it, and Robert looked sadly at him before glaring at Number 4 Privet Drive in the distance.

“You could have asked that your aunt and uncle live in a cupboard for ten years and your cousin eat what you ate while growing up,” Robert said, shaking his head at that perfect little home on that perfect little street. “Instead, your one true wish was that your friends have someone worthy.”

Harry shook his head and stared at the long, dark road in front of him. The sun reflected so brightly off the white mailboxes that Harry had to look away. “I only wished for my life to be easier.”

“You’re such a stupid boy,” Robert said as he stopped walking and let Harry leave him behind, “to believe that was your motivation.”

Harry ignored what he said, not sure what to make of his comment.

"Who's my secret keeper?" Harry asked, stopping too.

"The one you trust with your other life and your other past," Robert said, looking across the street at Mrs. Worthington walking her stupid brown dog.

"That's not fair!" Harry exclaimed, beyond concerns about what anyone might think of their exchange. "I would have trusted Hermione or Ron with that life and that past."

"Would you have?" Robert asked, sounding terribly annoying. Harry glared.

"Yes," he said defiantly.

"What would they have done with that information? Tried to change things? Fix things?" Robert asked and Harry hated that he had to admit that was exactly what they would do. "Because that isn't what you wanted. You wanted to trust someone to keep the secret to themselves and to protect the truth from others. You wanted someone that would know the past and not be bothered or burdened with it. You wanted someone that would trust you to come to them when the time was right. In short, you wanted them to be the trustee of your real past."

"That's not what you said before."

"I misspoke. Sue me. You learned the right lesson anyway."

Harry began to walk away, calling over his shoulder, "It should have been Aunt Petunia."

"Obviously not," Robert called back, not moving a muscle. How could he be so arrogant? How could he be so condescending? It was ridiculous that Harry himself did not know the person he trusted most. He walked faster along the path he traced so well the summer after his fifth year, when he had gone so often to sit on these swings and sulk.

When Harry arrived at the park, he saw Alana running up ladders and sliding down slides as Christine sat on a bench and watched, looking vaguely sad. Harry watched the family that he could have had, if only he could bring himself to accept the person he might have become with them.

Back at the Stump, Harry flew around the yard for hours with Alana, flew until the six year old almost fell off her broom from exhaustion. But when anyone asked that she go to bed, she'd look at Harry and shake her head. Apparently, this world's version of him never flew with his young adoptive sister. But when the small blonde girl's blinks grew longer and longer, Harry finally asked her if she was ready to stop.

"No," Alana said. "Why? Are you?"

Harry could keep flying for hours. "Yes, I'm tired."

Alana looked hesitant, but slid off her broom and put her feet on the ground. "I'm not."

"That's all right," said Christine, who had come out of the kitchen door the moment she saw her daughter stop flying. "Maybe you could fly again tomorrow and read a story tonight."

Alana looked up at her mother and then over at Harry, who sat awkwardly on his broom. She nodded, ran up to Harry, gave him a hug goodnight, and then ran back to her mother. Christine picked her up, nodded at Harry over her daughter's shoulder, and went inside to put her to sleep.

Harry pulled up hard and did a few dives. It was one of the few ways Harry had learned over the years to clear his head. He didn't have to think about anything when he was flying. That's why the hardest part about flying was landing.

But Harry came down anyway when he saw Matt sitting on a lawn chair watching him. He landed, dismounted, and stood with his Firebolt in his hand.

“What are you thinking about?” Matt asked. Harry looked up at the sky and said nothing. “You go back to school in two days.”

Harry was surprised. “It’s only been a week.”

“And that’s as long as they’ve decided to punish you.” Matt stayed seated, watching Harry intently.

“What if I didn’t want to go back?” Harry asked, but the words were meaningless. He was lost and unsure.

“You’re scared to go back?” Matt asked, sitting up and regarding Harry through his steady blue eyes.

“No,” Harry said defensively. Why was everyone accusing him of being afraid?

“Harry, you know you’ve been a son to me, right?” Matt said, standing up and taking the broom out of Harry’s hand. He walked over to the broom shed and leaned the broom against it.

“I suppose.” This whole situation made Harry uncomfortable. Matt was not Sirius. He wasn’t even Remus or Uncle Vernon. He was a stranger walking toward him, telling him he was like a son to him.

“I’ve raised you as if you were my son,” he went on, coming back to stand in front of Harry, “and I would have let you call me dad in a moment if Christine hadn’t been so adamantly against the idea. She wanted you to know your mother and father, recognize and identify their relationship with you. When you were younger I thought that was a bit twisted, but as you grew up I was glad we’d handled the situation that way.”

Harry hated talking about this again. Why couldn’t they pretend like everything was normal—Harry’s parents were dead, Matt and

Christine were strangers, and Harry lived with his aunt and uncle?
“Why?”

“Because it’s important that you realize your parents aren’t dead. Nor are they absent from your life,” Matt said, looking so calm and composed that Harry almost lost it, remembering the way Dumbledore was at the end of last year in his office.

“They’re as good as dead,” Harry said bitterly, looking past Matt at the Stump.

“No, they aren’t,” Matt said. “And you can’t let your fear keep you from knowing them. They were and are amazing people. You ought to be proud of what they gave up.”

Before Harry could fully respond, a memory of last Christmas overwhelmed him. It was the moment he and Ron and Hermione had run into Neville and his grandmother at St. Mungo’s. Neville, who in this world was such a pompous arse, had been embarrassed. But he had still been there in the hospital visiting his parents. His grandmother said he went there a lot. And it explained that box of gum wrappers in his trunk: they were all from his mother. Neville, who thought and acted like he was weak, had the strength to face his parents, his parents who might not recognize him, who might be mad, who might not be real enough.

But what if Harry’s parents hated him?

The moment the thought occurred to him, Harry realized it really was fear that was keeping him from seeing his parents. It was fear that had led him running back to his natural world, fear that made him desperate for Aunt Petunia to be the secret keeper, fear that led him away from that hospital.

And that was when Harry realized he would run no more.

He looked back up at Matt, and saw Christine behind him open and shut the door to the house. Together the tall, blonde pair was a comforting sight, though Harry had known them only a few months. They were kind and caring. And they thought he was their son.

If he chose, in the end, to have a different person be the-boy-who-lived, chose to leave this world for another where his parents might be dead, then Harry would not squander this brief opportunity he had to know his real parents. The thought was terrifying—going to the hospital and seeing them was gut-wrenchingly horrible—but he would do it anyway.

And he would never later understand why he waited so long.

Hearing echoes of his parents in his third year had almost made him want to endure Dementors all the time. Seeing them as echoes coming out of Voldemort's wand had given him the strength to run back to Hogwarts.

Harry looked at Matt and then Christine and took a deep breath.

"I'd like to see my mother now," he said. There was a long moment of silence afterward.

Christine nodded before taking three soft steps forward and embracing Harry. For a moment that stretched on like a decade, Harry rested his head on her shoulder and let himself relax. The next day, he would see his mother and father for the very first time.

Chapter 11

I'm Your Son

The trip to the hospital the next morning passed in a blur of floor gates and sterile walls. Later Harry would not be able to recall anything before the moment when he realized that he had seen that ward before, when Nagini had bitten Mr. Weasley: It was the place where Hermione, Ron, and Harry had run into Neville. With a sudden fierceness, standing outside the closed door leading to his parents, Harry felt a surge of pride for Neville as he realized how much his under-estimated friend endured.

Matt led Harry to the door marked 336 and stopped. Harry felt like he was about to face another Hungarian Horntail. Oddly, he wished he had his broom.

"I'll wait down the corridor," Matt said. Harry nodded at him, surprised to find that he was grateful that he had come with him. Christine had stayed home with Alana.

"This might not take very long," Harry said, hands in his pocket on his wand. Ever since the incident at the World Cup, Harry had found it reassuring to know his wand was near.

"Take as long as you like. I'll be there whenever you're done," Matt said, meeting Harry's gaze and giving him a small nod before walking away. Harry watched until the tall man turned the corner and then he focused on the pale blue door next to the glass window in front of him. Room 336. Slowly, or at least it seemed so to him, he began to open the door, but before he finished pulling it open, someone from the inside pushed it all the way open and walked out. Harry backed away in shock as a short, wispy witch jumped a bit and stared at him.

"I'm sorry," she said, sounding as if she were out of breath. The door closed behind her. "I didn't think anyone would be here."

"Neither did I."

She stared at him a moment long, looking quite frail and tired with those large black areas beneath her eyes. A moment of realization came and she said, "Oh. You must be their son. Harry."

He nodded. "Yes."

She held out her left hand to him and as Harry awkwardly shook it, he noticed that her right was holding a cane. She said, "I'm Cordelia Crouch."

Harry took his hand back. "Crouch?"

She sighed and looked back at the door behind her. "Yes."

"Are you Barty Crouch's mother? Mr. Crouch's wife?" Harry asked, shocked and disgusted.

"Yes," she said. The problem with her being so tired-sounding was that the woman seemed to absorb Harry's anger; he got little gratification from that.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked.

Mrs. Crouch gestured down the corridor. "I'm being treated."

Harry followed her gesture and saw a sign above the double doors at the end of the corridor that read, 'Terminal Ward.' Harry found it vaguely upsetting that the ward was named so bluntly. But as far as Harry knew, in his own world Mrs. Crouch had died years before in Azkaban.

"I'll let you visit with them now," Mrs. Crouch said, beginning to walk down the corridor. Harry almost let her go, but the thousands of questions in his head wouldn't let him just ignore their encounter.

"Why didn't you switch places with your son?" Harry asked, not even thinking about how crazy this question might have sounded to someone else. Mrs. Crouch stopped but did not turn around quickly. Instead, she put both her hands on her cane, took a deep breath, and

only then turned to address Harry. She really was looking the worse for wear as she looked up at him.

“Switch places?” she asked.

“With your son,” Harry said, deciding to explain. “The thought must have occurred to you. Switch places. Stop getting treatment, take Polyjuice and free him.”

Mrs. Crouch looked up at him and while she couldn't have been much older than Matt or Christine if she knew his mother or father, she looked almost Dumbledore's age. “I thought about it.”

Her honestly surprised Harry, but then he noticed the way she was staring so intently at his eyes, and wondered if she was still speaking to him.

She asked, “Would you have hated me if I'd gone through with it?” and Harry knew for certain that she was not really asking him this question.

Harry remembered the night in the graveyard, Crouch talking under the influence of Vertiserum, the rise of Voldemort. To be honest, Harry had never thought much about the woman in front of him. He had heard her name in passing when Crouch explained what she had done to save him. But Harry had long ago channeled all of his anger about the event at Wormtail and Voldemort and, though he didn't necessarily acknowledge this beyond a vague, oppressive sort of guilt, himself. The second rising of the Dark Lord had been inevitable. As a spirit – less than a ghost – Voldemort had been invincible. Dumbledore had told Harry that himself. So maybe, in a twisted sort of way, Mrs. Crouch had helped him by giving Voldemort the tools to rise when he did instead of in a few years, after Harry himself was lulled into a false sense of comfort.

But that didn't mean he didn't hate her.

She told him, before he could properly answer, “He is my son. I wanted to save him as your mother saved you.”

Harry recoiled at that comparison. "I wasn't a Death Eater."

The woman shrugged slightly, but she was so tiny that it looked like a strong wind might have just blown through a knocked her off balance. Harry understood that she was trying to say that she would have died for her son no matter what.

"It's not the same," Harry said.

"No," Mrs. Crouch said, taking a deep breath and releasing it. "It would not have been the same."

"But you considered it," Harry said.

"Briefly. For a moment," Mrs. Crouch said, "but then I was admitted here and I found myself visiting your mother and I—I could not do it. I owed her more than that."

"My mother?" Harry asked, shocked. "Why?"

There was a long pause.

"She saved my life and in return I owed her a Wizard's Debt," Mrs. Crouch said, staring at the far wall. "She could have asked me for anything then: money, jewels, a job, a recommendation... anything. Nothing could have made up for that Portkey. But she looked at me, horrified by the notion that she had that control over my life, and asked only that I give up the debt."

Harry's mother knew this woman?

"When did this happen?" Harry asked.

"Years ago." Mrs. Crouch looked tired, sickly as she padded over to a chair resting against the wall and sat slowly. "She was such a good woman. Good woman. And I almost forgot that until I spoke with her again."

This didn't make any sense. "And that was it? You gave up on your son?"

“No,” Mrs. Crouch said, “I never gave up on my son. No woman ever gives up on her child. But he hurt so many people, including your mother. I could not bring myself to give up my life for him when I owed your mother as much and she had refused to ask anything of me.”

Harry didn't know what to say. He could see how Mr. and Mrs. Crouch were compatible, though. Both so rule abiding.

“It hurts, though,” she said, looking down at her hands as they clutched her cane. “It hurts every day to know he's there. Hurts so much.”

Harry felt uncomfortable suddenly, realizing that he understood why Mrs. Crouch would have exchanged places with her son. He had always understood, though he didn't admit it to himself. If Ron were in prison – if Harry had known Sirius when he was in Azkaban – he would have offered to exchange places in a moment. And then, though he hadn't realized his bitter feelings until that moment, Harry forgave Mrs. Crouch and even pitied her.

Then he walked to the door, pushed it open, and walked inside.

It was a normal room. Harry hadn't expected that. It had a bed in the middle, a table for eating, a couch in the corner and a chess game set up in front of it on the floor, where Harry's parents were laying. They didn't turn to acknowledge him and he couldn't find breath enough to support himself if he dared move forward.

He took a step anyway. How could he not? This was his past. Sitting in front of him. A past he'd only ever encountered in the aftermath of a Dementor attack or as a shadow leaking out of Voldemort's wand.

But there they were. Playing chess. On the floor.

A cat wound its way around Harry's ankle, startling him into making a noise. Still Lily and James Potter did not react.

Actually, it wasn't until he took three more steps inside the room that his mother noticed him standing there and waved, looking embarrassed.

"Hello," she said, standing. "Sorry I didn't see you. How can I help you?"

She obviously didn't know who he was. Harry vaguely remembered someone saying the Longbottoms could not recognize their son. He'd never realized quite how much that would hurt.

"I just stopped in to say hello," Harry muttered, feeling totally inadequate. His father stood up and walked right past Harry without a word to what seemed like the loo. There was something wrong with his eyes. Something wrong with his mother's eyes too. Something that Harry recognized. It was the look Sirius had when he'd first escaped Azkaban. That Bartemus Crouch had when he spoke under Veritaserum.

"Want to—" His mother had been gesturing to the chess table when she suddenly stopped and looked back at him, narrowing her eyes. "Who're you? Why're you here?"

Nobody could ever claim Lily was subtle, Sirius had told Harry that once with a smile. Then he had laughed and said, Except Lily herself, who thought she was both an idiot and entirely secretive. She wasn't. She just got lucky that she loved James, who was blind as her. Harry hadn't understood what he meant. Harry still didn't understand.

"I'm Harry," he said. Clever, he thought. Good thing to say to his mother with whom he had never had a conversation.

"I'm Lily." She smiled. "Are you here to see James?"

"I'm here to see you both." He sounded like a genius, obviously, as he awkwardly shrugged his shoulders. "You and James."

"Well, that's nice," she said, standing. "Mrs. Crouch just came by for a visit too. Nice woman. Looks bad."

"You know Mrs. Crouch?" Harry asked.

"We met at a party," his mother said, walking over to the table and sitting at one of the chairs, facing him.

"She said you—"

"Doesn't matter. Long time ago. I'm sorry, what was your name again?" she asked, leaning forward. "I'm terrible with names."

Harry put his hands in his pockets and wished he were flying. "Harry."

"Just Harry?" She smiled and Harry couldn't help but remembered the way she looked in Snape's pensieve and as the ghost-like thing that came out of Voldemort's wand. In person, he realized, his mother was even more beautiful.

Her eyes flashed with panic. "Harry?"

Harry nodded, unable to squash the hope that he hated, hope that his mother might recognize him.

"I have a son named-- a son-- My son?" Harry's mum asked. Her eyes grew wide and panicky once more as she stood and took a step forward. "I have a son. He's just a baby. Where is he? Where is my son? Where's my son?"

She was looking around the room frantically, as if to spot her wandering child.

"I need to protect him," she said, running to the corner of the room to check a closet and the other side of the bed. "He needs to be with me or James. How are you even here? We only gave our Secret Keeper permission to tell three people and a baby, and even then he wrote to them so that they wouldn't know he was the Secret Keeper. Where is my child?"

She fell to all fours and looked under the bed, then crawled to check under the other one.

“Your son”—Harry took a deep breath—“is with Christine.”

Lily turned to look at the sixteen year old she did not recognize and stood up, asking, “Christine O’Connell?”

“Christine McGrath,” Harry corrected automatically. Lily shook her head slightly and stared at the door behind Harry.

“Yes. Yes. That’s right. She married Matt, didn’t she? I was there. Why can’t I--” Lily looked sharply at Harry. “And my son’s with them?”

“Yes,” Harry said, “and he has been for a few months now.”

Lily shoved him. “Liar.”

Harry did not know how to respond.

Lily paced back and forth. “Bring him here. He should be with me. Me. I’m his mother. I’m his mother.” She stopped pacing and turned to stare at him, looking like she was trying to see him through a fog that blurred her vision. “Months? He’s been with her for months? No. I’ve—No. I’d know if he’d been away that long.”

Harry felt a swell of hatred for Voldemort right then. But then his mother looked at Harry for a long moment and then leaned in uncomfortably closely.

“If you have Harry, I will kill you,” his mother said quietly. Harry almost wanted to reach out and touch this woman, but he kept his hands at his side as she came closer, her eyes narrowing as she began to raise her voice. “James and Sirius will try to get to you first, but I will be the one to kill you.”

But as quickly as the anger swelled up and made this woman great, it ebbed and left but a shell of a person holding out one shaking hand and running the backs of her fingers around the edge of his face.

“My son’s been with Christine for”—Lily let her hand fall to her side as she tilted her head to look straight into Harry’s eyes—“months?”

Harry nodded.

Lily asked, "Not Sirius? Not Petunia?"

"Petunia?" Harry repeated, a catch in his throat.

"She said— She said she'd take him in. If anything happened, because then Sirius would be dead. But he's not. He promised he'd die first, but Petunia was to take Harry. Always. Petunia said she'd protect Harry. Hide him. Keep him safe. Keep him secret. Why isn't he with her?"

A dull throbbing started in Harry's right temple. "He hated her house."

"He's just a baby," Lily snapped, head whipping around, a snarl on her lips. But once more, her eyes caught Harry's and she softened. The change in emotions was alarming. "I'm not fit, am I?"

In the awkward silence that followed, Harry was unable to come up with an appropriate response.

"Does he hate me?" Lily asked, eyes unfocused. "Does he hate me?"

"Who?"

"James."

Harry looked across the room at the mirror on the other end. "James? Your husband?"

She looked shocked, but then looked at her right hand. Touched her wedding ring with her left pointer, and grinned. "Yes. He married me. I have a cat. Dare? Dare?"

"Dare what?" Harry asked. "Do you want me to do something?"

Lily Potter laughed. Laughed and laughed as she shook her head. "No. It's my cat. I want my cat." She looked at him closely. "Do you have a cat?"

“No. I have an owl.”

“Oh. I just wondered. Because. Well. You look like him,” she said. “I think you might be—but that’s ridiculous. It’s only been months.” Harry swallowed. “I got a cat before we were even engaged properly. Before the wedding. James’ mother said that was a big deal. Never happened before. Her cat was so fat. Its stomach bounced as she walked. His dad’s was regal, though. So regal. Walked with its head held high and stepped around puddles. Which is so funny, because neither of them was like that. His mother was welcoming, but slim and fit even if she was older. His father liked to hug me hello. Those were his parents.”

Those were Harry’s grandparents. The first he’d ever heard of them beyond Sirius’ words about them letting him live with them.

His mother shook her head. “They were wonderful. Slightly miffed that we went to Christine’s villa in Italy for the honeymoon instead of their place in the south of France, but it was lovely. I married him. It’s still surprising.”

“I thought you hated him,” Harry said, thinking his mother’s reminiscing might actually help him accept some information about his parents. All he had to go on was Sirius’ word that his mother didn’t actually hate his mother in school.

“I tried to,” she said, shaking her head as she smiled. “I tried so hard to hate him. Even after everything with Remus and the patrols and everything, I tried. But I couldn’t. I’m not Sirius. I can’t just cut people off like that.” Harry thought she was probably talking about the way Sirius cut off Remus. “Regulus was nice, too. Proper. Polite. Quite. Deeply confused. Too bad he gave up on him.” Okay. Obviously his mother was talking about Sirius’ family, who he had also cut off.

“So you didn’t hate James?”

“James is the love of my life,” she said, laughing again as she sat on the edge of her bed. “I don’t even believe in true love.”

“You don’t?”

“No,” she said, “but when you meet someone like James, it’s hard not to believe in everything.”

Harry didn’t know anyone like that and said so.

“So you’ve never been in love,” his mother said. “But have you ever been obsessed with someone? Ever wanted to blow up a wall because no one – not family, friends, professors, or Ministry officials – could make you feel as good or as horrible as that person.”

Harry thought about Cho. “No.”

“Loving someone that much makes you vulnerable, gives them the power to hurt you. Like Gertrude and Sirius. Never seen her hurt more than by him or him by her. By silence, by ignoring each other, by pretending to themselves that they didn’t care. That’s how they hurt.” Lily shook her head sadly. “I didn’t want to give James that much power over me. Didn’t trust him. Took months of friendship to trust him. Took months of separation to trust myself.”

Harry was completely lost. Not by the idea of not trusting people. He understood that. Even understood a reluctance to tell someone how much they mattered. But his mother kept speaking in broken sentences and fragmented thoughts.

“You should think about trying to love someone that much,” she said. Harry started. “It hurts, though. Always. You give everything to them. All of everything you have and all it takes is a little Polyjuice and they can ruin your world. Your life. Your friendships.”

“That’s a good thing?”

“Sometimes, things need to break in order to be made right.” She looked up at him. “And sometimes those people, after breaking your heart, will prove how much they love you, earn your respect again, promise that they’ll not do something stupid and wind up dead. I couldn’t handle that. If he—no. But he’s alive. Alive. And so is my son. My amazing son.”

Harry's mother began to cry then and Harry, though he was deeply uncomfortable with such displays of emotion, couldn't help but move closer, kneel beside her and ask if there was anything he could do to help her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him. He had no way of knowing he one of a very select group to receive a hug from this private woman.

"I'm sorry I don't remember you," she said, holding him tightly.

Harry swallowed. "It's all right. I don't remember you either."

She let him go and he sank onto the floor in front of her. She slid off the bed to sit beside him.

"Really?" she asked, looking hopeful. "You really don't remember me?"

Harry shook his head. "Not a single memory."

"But you keep looking at me like I ought to know you. Like we ought to know each other. And I keep trying—trying so hard—to think about who you could be. You look like James. Not a carbon copy, but close. Like a relative."

Harry looked once more at the door through which his father had left. "Would it surprise you if I told you I was your son?"

He heard his mother gasp. "It's only been months. Days. Hours. I've only been here hours, right? Where am I?"

Harry looked back at his mother, who was holding his bent legs close to her chest. "Voldemort marked Neville, was destroyed, and then Death Eaters came to your home. I only just heard the story from Matt this morning."

"No," she said, shaking her head and blinking back tears. "No. Because then our Secret Keeper would have—"

"He told the Death Eaters. Told Voldemort," Harry said.

“What? No. He wouldn’t ever.”

“Yes, Peter—”

“Peter? What’s Peter got to do with anything?” Lily asked quickly.
“Sirius. It was Sirius. Always.”

“Stop it,” Harry snapped. His mother blinked and seemed to become more lucid. “It was Peter. We all know it.”

“I’ll deny it. Always.”

Harry felt so sad and frustrated. “You told them already that it was Peter. Until recently, they thought it was just the effects of the Cruciatus.”

His mother was shaking her head. “I would remember telling someone who our Secret Keeper was. I would—Cruciatus?” She paused. “Am I mad? Do they think I’m—?”

Harry nodded sadly. “Yeah. They do.”

“I’m not!” she said, shaking. “I’m not. Am I? But I don’t remember things well. James jumped in front of me. When did he do that? Why? Harry was at the nursery next door. Why?”

Harry looked at the mirror on the wall. He looked at the bookshelf and the beds and the table. He looked everywhere, and then he looked at his mother, his thin, shaking, beautiful mother.

“I’m sorry. What’s your name again?” she asked, looking angry with herself.

“Harry,” he said. “I’m your son Harry.”

“Liar. He’s a baby”— she paused, looked at her hands, and then back up at Harry—“You have no memories of me. Raised by—”

“Petunia,” Harry said, the freedom of being able to tell her everything strangely gratifying. “Petunia raised me.”

“Good,” Lily said, looking up at him. “Good. That’s where I wanted you to go. Despite everything, she’s family. Family. That means something.”

“You’re shaking,” Harry said, instead of telling his mother about the cupboard under the stairs and the hatred he faced from the Dursleys. They seemed like such petty things to complain about right then.

“I won’t remember this soon. Soon I’ll forget. I don’t even believe it now. Raised? It’s been hours.” She blinked more. “I’m so glad you’re all right. Safe. Grown up. Trained. Normal. Are you normal?”

Harry didn’t know how to answer that question.

“Everyone said you’d be extraordinary. Slughorn poked you in the belly as a baby and said, ‘Son of Lily’s got to be something special, doesn’t he?’ I told him to stop poking my baby. He laughed, but I think he wanted something to justify me marrying your father, who Slughorn always said was one of those boys that would peak in school. I think he was just miffed because James turned down Slug Parties since Peter and Remus weren’t invited.”

Harry sat and listened to his mother babble on and on about school and James and parties.

“Are you happy?” his mother asked him suddenly and Harry started. Happy? Was he happy? He thought about how nervous he was in this world, how he kept expecting the bottom to drop out of his happiness, how Christine’s affection and Matt’s guidance made him uncomfortable. He thought about how this version of himself sent Sirius to the Kiss and hated Remus. He thought about the way Hermione was unnerved by him and Ron was just disgusted. He thought a lot about Ginny Weasley and the way that she seemed to expect him to be so ambitious.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s all right. The ones that know for certain that they’re happy are the ones that are lying.” Mrs. Potter closed her eyes for a long moment. “I was never sure of anything. James wasn’t either. Said he was. Lied a lot. Loved me. Don’t understand that either. But when we faced Voldemort the first time – such an accident, it was our first mission – we were terrified. Terrified. Shaking. Until we saw that he was attacking someone else. Then we were angry. Not scared. And we fought him. Hard. That’s how we both are. We’d rather be attacked than see other people attacked.”

Harry nodded. That was something he completely understood.

“I think the only reason we survived those attacks was because we’d be damned if we’d let Voldemort hurt the other one. James was going to survive if it killed me.” Harry’s mother shook her head. “Plus, of course, we just outright hated Voldemort’s actions.”

“I hate him in general.”

“It’s hard to hate someone. Hard to see the world in absolutes.” His mother’s eyes were growing hazy again. “I let down my son.”

“No,” Harry said, shaking his head. “Never.”

“Don’t be stupid,” she said casually, determinedly, sadly. “Of course I have. He has no memories of me. I wasn’t there to protect him. Won’t be there. Don’t even know where he is now.”

“If he were here—” Harry cut himself off. What was he going to ask her? If he were here, would you believe it? His mother had little to no grasp on reality and he wanted to selfishly tell her who he was? No. He wouldn’t hurt her like that. Never.

“If he were here, I’d hug him so tight he couldn’t breathe, and I’d tell him that I love him.” His mother blinked a couple of times. “I’d tell him to trust Sirius and be vulnerable. To cast a shield. To never take the Portkey and leave others behind. That I know the prophecy and I think it’s stupid. Utterly stupid. Dumbledore and James are close. They’re friends. Whatever. That doesn’t mean I have to believe that a

prophecy means anything. I don't believe in fate. I believe in free will. In choice. Oh, and I'd tell him that Voldemort babbles."

Harry stared at his mother, a woman he had never thought imagined he would actually understand, and he laughed. Voldemort did babble.

"And I'd tell him to do what he thinks is right. No one else. It's not between him and anyone, anyway. That's a quote from somewhere. Don't know. Think a Muggle."

"I'll let him know," Harry said, swallowing again. "Everything."

"And tell him I'm sorry that I'm a terrible mother."

"No," Harry said, realizing that he was the one who took his parents' sacrifice so lightly that he wished it away. He had taken the Portkey and left others to suffer. "I'm a terrible son."

He had gone against her wishes to have him raised by Petunia. He had fled from his world. Fled from his responsibility. While his mother and father had seen Death Eaters attacking others and ran into the fray, Harry had run away from the fighting, from the pressure of failure. He'd abandoned a whole world simply because he was tired.

"That's stupid. No one can be a terrible son. Who're your parents? If they told you that, I'll kick them."

Was it ridiculous that it hurt each time she lapsed? Probably. But it hurt nonetheless.

"Having a love affair in our own room?" asked a jovial voice from the area to Harry's right. He looked over to see that his father had reentered the room and was winking at his mother.

"Oh please," she said, waving a dismissive hand at him. "You know Sirius is the love of my life."

"Yet you married me," James said curiously, leaning against the wall.

“Yes, well, after I got the cat I couldn’t exactly back out, could I?” she asked, smiling. “Besides, you’re terribly attractive.”

“And rich. Don’t forget rich.”

“And humble. The total package,” she said wonderingly as she walked over to give him a hug and a kiss. With James’ arms around Lily’s waist, Harry’s parents turned to face him. “Oh, James. This man stopped in to see you. Didn’t he? I think he did. I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name.”

Harry took another breath and stood. “I’m Harry.”

“That’s a good name,” Harry’s father said.

“It was nice meeting both of you, but I have to go now,” Harry said. “I have to go un-wish something.”

“Isn’t that how it always is?” his mother asked, laughing. His father kissed her again. Then they both waved him out of the room.

As he was leaving, he heard his father say, “Nice bloke. Handsome. Looked a bit like me,” and Harry waited until the door was completely shut to bend over and rest his hands on his knees, breathing harshly.

“You all right?”

Harry’s head snapped to the side as his hand reached for his wand. Matt looked calmly back at him from where he was standing next to the wall.

“I’m fine.”

Matt said nothing. Harry straightened his posture and glared at him.

“She thinks she’s been in there a couple of days,” Harry said, the words tearing at his throat.

“I know.” Matt looked a little pained. “Every time I visit she tells me not to relax, that Voldemort’s followers are still lurking. When you

were three or so, she spent nearly a year teaching Christine the Patronus Charm because she didn't remember teaching it to her before and was always surprised by how quickly Christine caught on." Matt shook his head and then looked at Harry. "I'm proud of you for coming today. It's hard on all of us to see them."

It's also kind of amazing, Harry thought. Despite how painful it was to see his mother like that, hear her babble and forget him, and be so utterly confused... he had seen his mother. Was he a horrible person for wanting to stay in this world to visit a version of his mother that didn't know him and never would? It was like the Dementors again. How much was he willing to sacrifice his health to have a small memory of his parents?

Chapter 12

I'm Done

Harry and Matt took the long way home. Well, actually, that's just what Matt called it. In reality, they stopped by a pub and had a bite to eat. Matt had a beer and looked curiously at Harry when he declined the same.

"I don't know what to think about you," Matt said, hands wrapped around his glass. Harry said nothing as he looked at the pictures on the wall and the people sitting around the bar. They seemed Muggle. "When did you learn to sit on the edge of your seat?"

Harry looked away from the brown-haired woman at the end of the bar. "What do you mean?"

The waiter placed their food in front of them and Matt waited until he was gone before answering Harry's question. "I mean that you could have cursed our waiter if he'd gone for his wand."

Harry picked up his fork and twirled it around his fingers. If he had been able to curse the waiter it would have said more about Harry's reflexes than his skill. Quidditch truly was his gift.

"You act like you've lived through the war," Matt said. He didn't sound accusatory, simply curious.

That caught Harry's attention. "The war with Voldemort?"

Matt nodded. "People couldn't relax for eleven years. More like fifteen, actually, since attacks like the ones on your parents after Voldemort was vanquished put people on edge again until the Aurors promised they'd captured everyone."

"It was bad when he was in power?" Harry asked.

Matt nodded. "People were always ready for attacks: meals eaten out were devoured quickly; parents rushed their children onto the

Hogwarts Express and ran out of King's Cross; and people tended to grab their wand when they woke up from a nightmare."

Harry realized that his right hand was resting in his pocket with his wand and said, "Constant Vigilance and all that."

Matt, who had been chewing on his meal, paused, and swallowed. "Things like that have me almost convinced that Christine's right."

"About what?" Harry asked, eating a single chip.

"About you being different." Matt took a sip of his beer. "You've never met Alastor Moody, how do you know his motto?"

Oops. "He's famous."

"I suppose," Matt said, looking kindly at Harry before glancing pointedly at Harry's plate. "You planning to actually eat that food or just look at it?"

Harry picked up his fork and began eating.

"So was it something I did?" Matt asked.

"Something you did?" Harry repeated, looking up confused.

Matt nodded. "Am I the reason you've been so distant?"

"What? No," Harry said. It was so odd to think that Matt McGrath, who Harry still thought of as a stranger, expected Harry to be close to him. Harry hadn't even known who he was in his normal world. Which, actually, was really odd.

"You seem preoccupied," Matt said.

"I just met my parents for the first time," Harry said, looking back down at the plate.

"I'm trying to decide if you're exaggerating or not, because I've taken you to see them multiple times," Matt said.

"It's not like they remember," Harry said, thinking about his mother and father in the hospital, the way they fell into and out of coherence.

"Does that matter?" Matt asked. "Does it make visiting them any less worthy of your time?"

Harry focused on Matt McGrath across the little table from him. "No. It really doesn't."

Matt nodded and tapped his fork once on the side of his plate before beginning to eat again. Harry went back to his own food, mind consumed with images of his parents from their brief meeting: his mother embracing him and apologizing for not remembering him, his father leaning so casually against the wall and teasing her. They were exactly as he had always imagined them, only not really. Because instead of being loving and alive and well, they were locked in a padded room, forgetting the names of their guests almost the moment they heard it, crying with frustration as they tried to remember a memory that kept alluding them, and then screaming about danger. Harry was the reason they were locked in a room in the corner of a hospital with only Mrs. Crouch and the McGraths to visit. He had thrown their sacrifice away in favor of hiding in a world where he had no responsibility. He was so pathetic.

"You all right, Harry?" Matt asked.

Harry nodded and looked up from his meal. "Thanks for taking me there. It helped me a lot."

"What do you mean?" Matt asked, smiling.

Harry thought about what he'd learned and something Ron said years before stuck out in his mind. "I needed to sort out my priorities."

"And have you?"

Harry nodded. "It was easy."

“Good,” Matt said. It was good and it had been easy. Harry knew what he had to do and, more importantly, why he had to do it. While he had wanted to go back to his world all year, it had previously been because he didn’t deal well with change. It was disquieting to see his best friends react adversely to him, upsetting to hurt Parvati because he wasn’t who he had been. He didn’t like that people thought he was supposed to be a chaser, didn’t like learning that he had a family he didn’t know, and even Aunt Petunia not knowing him was upsetting, though she had been very similar to the version of her that Harry knew. But most of all, Harry hated that this version of him didn’t seem to deserve respect. So he wanted to go home, but visiting his parents gave him a real reason to go home: because he would always step in front of others to protect them, as his father had stepped in front of his mother. And like his mother, Harry would never be satisfied with letting someone else—in this world, Neville—step in front of him.

But that didn’t rectify the problem he was having with how he ought to deal with everyone in this world. Should he tell them all the truth? Harry was fairly certain they’d think he was insane, which could be a problem. He had things to do that included finding Robert the bookseller, and if people thought he was insane they might not let him leave the Stump. So instead, he would pretend like this world was normal and he would treat these people as they should always be treated: with respect.

They finished their meals and stood to go. Harry said, “Thanks for dinner.”

Matt looked oddly at him before grinning and wrapping an arm around his neck, effectively pulling Harry into a half hug. “I love you, kid.”

Harry, who had stiffened when Matt grabbed him, looked over at Matt and wondered exactly why he had never met this man in his own universe. He supposed that since in his own world he was the Boy-Who-Lived, the Ministry and Dumbledore had been much more insistent that Harry live with his aunt and the protection that her house offered. After he went back, he’d be sure to find Matt and Christine and let them know that in a world where he was less famous, they had taken him in as a son and treated him like he belonged in their home.

Matt and Harry arrived at the Stump at a quarter past four, and Harry couldn't help but wonder what had taken them so long. Their late lunch hadn't really taken that much time. How long had he spent with his parents?

"Harry!" squealed Alana the moment he stepped out of the fireplace. "Can we go flying now? Mum said I had to ask you and now you're back so can we?"

Out of every odd, strange, or changed thing that Harry had encountered in this alternate universe, Alana McGrath might have been the most confusing. She always wanted to do things with him: play hide-and-seek, have him watch her fly, sit by him during the tour of Rome. Her obsession with him was a bit like Collin Creevey, only her obsession with him stemmed, he thought, from the mere fact that he was her older brother. She didn't want an autograph; she wanted his time. And he was surprising himself with how willing he was to give it to her.

"All right," Harry said. Alana punched the air in triumph and then sprinted out of the room. They all heard the back door bang a moment later as she called back for Harry to hurry up.

"You don't have to fly with her, you know," Christine said, walking over to Matt and wrapping her arms around his stomach as she rested her head on his shoulder.

"I know." Harry nodded.

"But she hasn't stopped talking about flying with you all day," Christine shared.

"She's—" Just as he had failed to properly describe her that first week he'd met her, Harry couldn't think of a word that accurately portrayed the energetic six-year-old.

“Small,” Christine said, smiling at him. Harry smiled back, remembering the way he’d said that to her in June, before turning to follow Alana into the backyard where she was struggling to drag three brooms out of the shed with her. Harry saw that his Firebolt was one of those brooms and jogged over.

“Need some help?” he asked, taking the brooms from her.

“I didn’t know which one you’d want,” Alana said, going back into the shed and finding her own toy broom. “I knew it was brown but I didn’t know if it was that one or that one or that one.” She pointed to the three brooms.

“It’s all right,” Harry said, leaning the two other brooms against the shed and holding his Firebolt in front of Alana and him. “It’s the one with Firebolt written on the side.” He pointed to the word.

Alana giggled. “I can’t read yet.”

“Oh,” Harry said, thinking. “Just look for the gold word on it.”

Alana wasn’t really paying attention as she scrambled onto her broom and took off. “Can you dive again? Like last time?”

Harry smiled. “Sure.”

And so they spent the next few hours flying around the backyard, Harry diving around Alana. She shrieked with delight and told him to watch her make a sharp turn. At one point she barreled straight at the shed with such speed that Harry instinctively knew she would not be able to turn away in time. Without thinking, he flattened himself against his broom and raced toward her, arriving just in time to grab the back of her jumper and yank her off the broom. She laughed as he pulled up.

“It would have stopped,” said a voice beneath them. Harry looked over and saw Christine standing in the yard. He landed and put Alana on the ground. The child ran over to retrieve her broom, which was close to, but not touching, the shed.

“What?”

“Toy brooms are charmed to stop before they knock into anything,” Christine explained.

“Oh,” Harry said.

“But that was a wonderful catch,” she offered.

Alana and Harry went back into the air.

After Christine had put Alana to bed that evening, she came back to the yard and conjured a chair to sit in and watch him fly some more. On his Firebolt, Harry zipped up and down the field, diving toward the ground and making fast turns. All the while he kept thinking, mentally listing all of the people that could have possibly been his secret keeper and how he was going to convince them to send him home and respect his parents’ sacrifice. By the time he was too tired to keep flying, all of the lights in the house had been turned off except for in the kitchen and the one on the table next to Christine.

Harry landed on the ground with slightly shaky legs. They were cramped up with all of the time he’d spent in the air. He put the broom away in the shed and walked back to where Christine was. He had planned to go in and go to sleep, but she conjured a chair to her left and motioned for him to sit. Deciding to accept her invitation, Harry sank into the comfortable chair.

“So, how do you know Robert?” Christine asked. Harry was shocked momentarily before he remembered that Christine had seen Robert outside Aunt Petunia’s house when they had visited her.

“I met him at the beginning of the summer,” Harry said.

Christine stared at him, obviously sad and Harry was rather shocked. He’d never seen her like this. “When?”

“The beginning of summer,” Harry repeated.

“Was it the day we left for Italy? Was it the day you tore out of here and bought yourself a new wand?” Christine asked. Harry didn’t say anything. “What did you do, Harry?”

Harry’s defenses went up. “I didn’t do anything.”

Christine looked at him. “He’s a genie, Harry. Did you make your wish?”

“He’s a what?” Harry asked, confused.

“A genie.”

“Like a lamp-carrying, three-wishes genie?” Harry asked. It was too late for this conversation. He must be dreaming or something. Genies weren’t real.

“Like a one-true-wish genie,” Christine said, nodding.

“How do you know?”

“I made my wish,” Christine said. “It was a while ago, but it’s hard to forget something like that.”

“What did you wish?” Harry asked, curious beyond belief.

“I wished that the people I loved were happy,” Christine said, her voice rather soft.

“And he turned that into something bad?” Harry asked, bitterness rising up in him.

Christine shook her head. “No. They were happy, I just didn’t realize what it took to make some of them happy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Robert later told me that I hadn’t specified enough, which was good. He had liked my wish and wanted to make it possible, but making people happy all the time wasn’t healthy. They’d have died and he’d

have forced me to reverse my wish. Instead, he made all of them happy for a day.” Christine looked up at the stars and sighed a deep sigh.

“Was it awful?”

Christine shook her head, her blonde hair swinging behind her. “It was wonderful. Your mother had Matt and me over to her house. James invited his friends over. We sat around drinking Firewhiskey and pretending like there wasn’t a war outside and like we didn’t know one of us was a traitor.”

“Peter was there,” Harry said, his jaw tightening.

“Peter and Remus and Sirius Black,” Christine said. “They arrived separately and left together.”

Harry looked down at his broom and tried not let his hatred of Peter Pettigrew overwhelm him.

“And I cried that night, wondering why it took a wish to make us happy if we all just wanted to sit around and laugh,” Christine said quietly.

Harry looked over at her and blinked a couple of times. “That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was the last time we were all together,” Christine said sadly. “But I learned a lot about Robert in that short time, and I know that he could have twisted my wish in the worst sort of way. He’s scary.”

Harry didn’t say anything.

“Tell me what you wished,” Christine said imploringly.

Harry looked away, ashamed. He had met his parents for only an hour and was embarrassed by his wish. Christine, who had lived through the first war and stayed strong all that time, would surely find him childish to have wished to run away. “I don’t want to tell you.”

“Harry,” Christine said, “I love you. You’re my son in all but blood, and if you’re in any sort of trouble, I can’t help you unless you let me.”

Harry met her stare for stare. “I don’t need your help.”

Something broke in Christine’s eyes and she asked, “What did he do? What did you ask for?”

Harry bit his cheek, looking at her, and knew he had to answer. Finally, he said, “I asked for the world to be safer.”

“What do you mean?” Christine pressed.

“I asked that my friends be protected.” Harry looked at the house, unable to look into her deep brown eyes any longer.

“What did you ask for?” Christine asked again, sharper. Harry stood up to walk away, guilt eating at his heart. Christine grabbed his arm. “What did you ask for, Harry? Please tell me--”

“I asked not to be the one, all right?” Harry snarled, ripping his arm out of her grasp. She stood to face him.

“The one what?”

“The one,” Harry said derisively. “The Boy-Who-Lived, the orphaned son the press loves to write about, the spotlighted one that lost his parents and got his godfather killed and his friends put in danger. I asked not to be a lightening rod for evil anymore. And I regret it. I wish I hadn’t done it because I just met my parents for the first time and I know my wish was wrong and that they’d be ashamed.”

He expected her to yell, to say he’d made a stupid wish, to tell him all of the truths that caused him such pangs of guilt. Instead, when he turned his defiant glare on her, Christine looked at him steadily.

“We don’t allow smoking in the house,” Christine blurted out.

“What?” What sort of comment was that? Harry had just told her that he was from an alternate universe in which he was the Boy-Who-Lived and she was talking about smoking. Did she think he was doing drugs?

Christine looked preoccupied. “I’m scared and surprised. It was the first thing I could think to say.”

“Okay,” Harry said uncertainly.

“Well,” Christine said, explaining herself, “at first I thought you’d gone mad. Then I thought about all of the things you do differently and what you said to Remus and Dumbledore. So I was thinking about how if you’re telling the truth, that means you’re from another reality, and then I thought about the way you’re so awkward around me. I thought it might be because you didn’t live with me in that world and if that’s the case then you don’t know the rules of the Stump and the only one that I actually care about is the not smoking in the house rule. I’ll have Matt make a copy of his rules later. There aren’t that many, but he likes them: treat others as you want to be treated and things like that. I don’t consider them rules, but they’re his.” Harry wondered if this was babbling and when Christine started talking about corresponding punishments, he decided it was and cut her off.

“I—I don’t really care,” Harry said.

Christine blinked at him. “You should. Ignorance isn’t an excuse for breaking a rule.”

Harry didn’t know quite what to say to that.

“Oh Harry.”

“Oh Harry, what?” he asked defensively.

“I’m so sad for you.” Christine sat down, reached out and grabbed his hand, squeezing it gently. “I’m so sorry I didn’t help you more. Over here and over there.”

“Don’t be sorry.”

"Then what can I be?" Christine asked. "What can I do to help you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You came here to learn something. At least, I think you must have. Robert obviously thought your wish was stupid and needed to convince you to agree with him, so he brought you here to learn a lesson." Christine paused. "So what would you like to know?"

Harry looked at her skeptically as he too sat down again. "You're willing to accept everything I just told you?"

Christine put her hand on his and looked him in the eye. "I raised a son that looked a lot like you, but he hugged me goodnight and gave me a kiss on the cheek to greet me in the morning. He laughed when Matt suggested that he not try out for the Quidditch team his second year and had a screaming fight with Naomi the last time they were in a room together."

Harry waited for her to continue. When she didn't, he asked, "That's your proof that I'm from a different world?"

"That's my proof that even if you're not, you've changed for some reason, and I missed the transformation. I want to get to know you again."

"Maybe I'm just going through a stage." Harry couldn't believe she wasn't trying to rationalize his story as a bit of lunacy.

"Or maybe you've started taking drugs," Christine said. "I don't know why you're different, I just want to be here to help you."

"Right." Harry looked up at the stars. This was too good to be true. She was obviously lying.

"Harry"--Christine looked at him with wide eyes and Harry could see that she really was serious--"I don't lie to you."

Harry opened his mouth to give an instance in which Christine had lied to him, but all he could think of was the time when she'd said Sirius was guilty. And while technically she had been lying, she had thought she was speaking honestly. He tried to think of another time, but couldn't. "You must lie."

"What do I have to keep from you?"

Harry thought of the thousands of secrets that he had been keeping from nearly everyone for the last seven years: Nicholas Flammel, the invisibility cloak, the Polyjuice Potion, the Basilisk's voice in the walls, the Marauder's Map, Sirius's innocence, the Time-Turner event, Grimmauld Place, the memory of Voldemort attacking, Umbridge making him write those lines. And all of the little lies he simply told people to make them feel better: that he was fine with going home to his aunt and uncle; that he wasn't scared to be in the Tri-Wizard Tournament; that he didn't keep Sirius's letters when they were really in the bottom of his trunk; that he didn't think any of this war was his own fault when he knew he was the reason everyone had died. And now he was in a world where he had not spoken the truth in months, except to his mother earlier that day.

"I can't imagine what it's like to be able to be completely honest," Harry said, strangely comfortable admitting that to Christine. "There are so many secrets I've had to keep."

"That must be horrible," she said, "to have to protect so many things."

Harry had never thought about secrets that way, as things that he needed to protect, but he supposed it was an accurate description. Christine, while absentminded, had a tendency to speak truthfully and frankly. She put Harry at ease, which confused him since he wasn't comfortable very often around people he barely knew, but she was welcoming, kind, non-judgmental, and great about not pushing him. She accepted that he was different, accepted that he didn't want to talk about his parents, didn't want to talk about chasing down Pettigrew and hurting Ron. Instead, she offered easy conversations and friendly smiles every time he was near. And she had walked with him all over Rome because he was the 'adventurous one.'

“Did I— Did this version of me appreciate you?” Harry asked suddenly.

“Appreciate me?” Christine asked, confused. “For what?”

Harry shrugged and looked out at the large yard. “For never complaining and never yelling. For, you know, trying to get him out of his room after he’d been suspended even though he might have attacked another student.” Harry wanted to say, ‘For seeming to care so much about him,’ but that felt awkward.

“Children don’t need to appreciate parents,” Christine said. “Unconditional love is in the job description.”

Harry ignored the idea that she loved him and said, “So he didn’t.”

“He was a teenager,” Christine said, smiling. “They don’t appreciate anything.”

Harry thought about the way that Christine had believed him when he’d told her he thought that Sirius was innocent. Harry remembered the way she had bought him ice cream in Rome and said he was being so good with Naomi and Alana. He remembered the way she hugged him after he told her he was going to see his parents.

“I’m sorry I was such a prat,” Harry said, talking about his other self and himself when he had first arrived. “Such a self-centered prat.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” she said. After all of these months, Harry still couldn’t quite accept Christine’s complete calm. When he had first arrived at the Stump, he’d run out of the house to Diagon Alley, but not before he managed to be particularly rude to nearly everyone in the house. Yet when he returned, Christine had looked at him and asked, Had a bit of an itch to shop, did you? No, ‘Where were you?’ No, ‘Why did you do that?’ No lecture about ingratitude or expense. Just a welcome calm.

“I hate that this version of me didn’t know what a good thing he had in your home,” Harry said.

“And I hate that you do,” Christine said. Hermione always said that the worst thing about Harry living with his aunt and uncle was that he expected every family to act the way they did, no matter how much time he spent in the company of the Weasleys. Maybe that was what Christine meant, that Harry shouldn’t have been grateful for a nice home, that he should have expected to be treated the way Matt and Christine treated him. Yet Harry couldn’t bring himself to believe that he should assume adults would be so kind and hospitable to him, even old friends of his parents.

“I’m going to go back to my world,” Harry said suddenly.

“Why?” Christine asked.

Harry looked over at her. “It’s where I belong.”

“Why?”

She was beginning to sound like Alana, but Harry didn’t think he should tell her that, so instead he said, “My parents—they—” And damned if he didn’t know how to put his words to thought.

“They’re sick,” Christine said.

“No, they’re...” Harry tried to articulate the feeling of seeing his hero-worshipped parents in a room and not quite saying it correctly.

“They’re two big people in a very small room.” Christine was smiling softly, almost sadly. “They were always too big. Too big for one house to hold, so they became Head Boy and Girl. Too big for Hogwarts, so they joined a cause. The biggest cause. The biggest fight. And they became the biggest heroes back then, the untouchable Potters.”

The light turned on in one of the rooms on the second floor of the house, but it went out again quickly as Harry stared at the ground in front of his chair and tried not to let his emotions overwhelm him.

“When Dementors come close to me, I used to hear them,” Harry admitted.

“That must have been awful,” Christine said, “and a bit wonderful.”

That was a pretty good summary, actually. “Yes. Exactly.”

“What do you hear now?” Christine asked.

“What?”

“You said you used to hear them. What do you hear now?” She waited there, her blonde hair tied up in a knot on the top of her head.

“A lot of things,” Harry said, remembering his most recent encounter with a Dementor, and somehow feeling comfortable enough to tell Christine about the echoes of memory he heard. “I still hear my dad yelling at my mum to leave with me and her asking Voldemort to take her instead of me”—Harry took a breath and he saw Christine’s eyes watering even as she nodded—“but there’s also Voldemort telling Pettigrew, ‘Kill the spare,’ meaning a classmate of mine that I wasn’t especially nice to.”

“It always hard to remember the way we treated the ones who leave us,” Christine said, sounding like she was quoting something, “but you have to learn to forgive yourself before you wind up killing yourself instead.”

Christine looked over at him as if considering a large crossword and deciding where to start writing and Harry understood. “You don’t believe me.”

“About what?”

“Being from a different world,” Harry said, leaning forward, frustrated. “I know I can’t exactly tell you why I want to go back, but after seeing my mum and dad, I have to. I can’t just throw away their sacrifice and—well—the truth is that I don’t want anyone else to have to deal with being marked. It’s too hard.”

“You don’t just want to be famous again?”

“No,” Harry said, slouching into the chair.

“Neither would I,” she said, relaxing. “All those people caring about what I do all the time... it’d be unsettling and very unpleasant.”

“More than that,” Harry muttered, surprising himself. He ran his fingers over the ridges in the wicker chair’s armrests.

“Neville can’t do anything without a press conference.” Christine sounded both questioning and disapproving.

“I don’t give press conferences.” Harry thought about facing a room full of Rita Skeeters and shuddered.

“Why’d you come here?” Christine asked suddenly. Harry stopped examining the chair and looked over at her. “I mean, I know you said all that stuff about you wanting your friends to be protected and you didn’t want to be the one, but I can’t believe you were that selfish.”

“I just wanted them to have someone who— My best friend keeps telling me that I have a thing for saving people, and last year Voldemort—well, I was stupid and he tricked me. My godfather died because of it, trying to protect me.”

“Sirius?” Christine asked.

Harry nodded, the stab of pain going through him. Wasn’t that feeling supposed to dull over time? Didn’t people say pain and loss lessened over time? “Dumbledore and Snape both could have prevented it.”

“That’s not what you mean, though,” Christine said, sounding sad. “You mean to say that you think you could have prevented it.”

“I suppose.” Harry looked up at the stars and wished he had been decent enough at Astronomy to be able to find the Dog constellation. He could only ever find Orion.

“So you blame Dumbledore and Snape, but yourself most of all?” Harry said nothing to her query. “That’s stupid.”

“What?”

“That’s stupid,” Christine repeated clearly. “Blame Voldemort.”

“I do.”

“No, you blame Dumbledore, Snape, and you. We just agreed to that.” Christine ticked the names off on her fingers. “But you can’t. You just can’t.”

“All right, I’ll just stop then,” Harry said sarcastically.

A cloud passed over Christine’s face. “People always blame themselves. Matt was a wreck after his older sister died. He kept saying, ‘If only I’d been there. If only I’d...’ but there was nothing he could have done. Nothing I could have done if I’d been there with your parents. Well, I mean, we could have fought with those Death Eaters. We would have. And maybe it’d have made a difference, but it wasn’t our fault we weren’t there. It wasn’t our fault that they were hurt. It was the Death Eaters and Voldemort who did it.”

“If I hadn’t gone to the Department of Mysteries, he’d be alive. It’s that simple.”

“Why’d Voldemort want you to go to the DoM?” Christine asked.

Harry clenched his fists. “For a prophecy. For a damn prophecy that Dumbledore could have told me about months before. He could have just said, ‘There’s a prophecy about you and Voldemort. He’ll want you to collect it for him. Avoid that.’ And the worst part is that Voldemort was there! He could have gotten it himself.”

“Well, if he was after a prophecy, he did need you,” Christine said.

“What?”

“Only the people discussed in the prophecy and the original Seer can take a prophecy from the shelves in the DoM,” Christine said. “So if the Seer wasn’t available, Voldemort did need you there. Plus, he was probably trying to murder you, so it was like killing two birds with one hammer.”

Harry shook his head. “He was there. He could have taken it himself.”

“Not if—” Christine cut herself off. “I’m trying to think about the differences between the worlds and if it’s just you and Neville switching, then he couldn’t go into the DoM. Was he in there?” Harry thought about it and shook his head. Voldemort had just been in the lobby. “Your mum warded the hell out of the DoM. That was her job her first year there. She couldn’t tell us much, but she won an award for it from the Minister of Magic, which is probably why Voldemort targeted your parents in the first place. Stupid Ministry.”

“My mum was an Unspeakable?” How could Harry not have known that?

“One of the youngest and best,” Christine said. “We used to play a game in school that she always lost, but by seventh year she had learned wards and we couldn’t touch her. She still lost because she was really bad at curses and she was kind of a slow runner, but after she learned wards, I couldn’t hit her with anything. She blocked tracking charms and redirected curses. Once she sent Tracy over a railing because she made a ward too strong. She never got any points for hitting us, but she never lost any either.”

Harry tried to reconcile the powerful woman Christine described with the mother he had met that morning. It was surprisingly easy. “I’m sorry my wish put her into that room.”

“It didn’t. Bellatrix Lestrange did.” Christine paused for a moment. “How can you un-wish your wish?”

Conversations with Christine, Harry was learning, tended to lack proper segues. “I have to find the person I trust to take my place and I have to find the person I trusted to keep the secret of where I came from.”

“Well that’s easy.”

“Actually, it’s not that easy.” Harry felt a flash of annoyance. He’d been working all year to figure this out and she thought it was easy?

“You don’t know who you trust with the secret?” Christine asked, looking confused. “Or you don’t know the replacement?”

“I don’t know either of them,” Harry said, tapping his finger on his wand. “I just know that I want to go home.”

“Doesn’t that mean you don’t trust anyone to replace you?” Christine asked.

“I just want to help again. To be trusted by Dumbledore. To have Remus not hate me,” Harry said quietly.

“So you still think someone else should be the one meant to fight Voldemort?” Christine asked. “Someone like whom?”

“Anyone that could do it,” Harry said. “Dumbledore or McGonagall or—”

“No, no, no,” Christine said, shaking her head and hands at him. “Be serious.”

Harry grit his teeth momentarily. “I am.”

Christine took a moment. “What’s wrong with Neville?”

Harry thought back over his time in this world. “He didn’t even try to get into the Chamber.” It was more than that, but that was a pretty good example. This Neville couldn’t handle the pressure, spent his time being famous and protected. His first encounter with Voldemort, Harry knew instinctively, would end badly.

“What’s wrong with you?”

That question surprised Harry, but he knew the answer. "I haven't trained enough. I'm not brilliant like Hermione or clever or anything. I'm just lucky a lot. And I have people with me to help. The one to fight Voldemort should be more than that, should be ready."

"Like your mum and dad were ready?" Christine asked, sounding amused.

"Why's that so funny?"

"Your parents were twenty, newly married with a baby. They put their trust in the wrong friend and thought they were safe," Christine said, shrugging. "The picture of not ready."

"But Dumbledore—"

"Has fought his battles," Christine said kindly. She folded her legs up under her and turned in her seat to face Harry more fully. "I know you think the person to beat Voldemort will be the best trained one, but it won't be. It can't be. It'll be someone in your generation, like it was someone in mine. The first war pitted Death Eaters against those who fought back, but those who fought back weren't the old people. Old people were comfortable, ready to banish Muggle-born if that was the price of freedom." Her tone was derisive. "It was the young ones, newly out of Hogwarts, who fought, who lost themselves in the fight, who refused to compromise."

"Like my parents."

"Like everyone. We all lost people and had to make difficult decisions, and now we have to live with them."

Harry wondered what she meant by that. "What difficult decision did you have to make?"

"To hide," Christine said after not a single moment of thought. "To go into hiding when I was pregnant while other people kept fighting. My generation will help you. I will. Remus and Matt will, but we're tired of war. Tired of going to funerals, and, though we don't say so aloud, the thought of facing another war makes us sick with dread. The

thought of you, Andrew, and Stephen fighting the same battle my generation failed to win makes me sad and angry. But you will still go and I will know that you should because Voldemort is evil. You'll join Dumbledore again, who is the most tired of us all for he has seen so many die, and some of you will die and it'll break my heart all over again. But you'll face the threat because you believe strongly enough. I don't think many who lived through the first war remember much about our cause. Or if they do, they've warped it."

"Warped it to believe what? That Death Eaters are good?" Harry asked, disgusted.

"No," she said, "to believe that killing Voldemort is all that matters. They remember the pain and suffering of the last war and they'll think that if they can just kill Voldemort, no one will hurt anymore. As a result, they'll sacrifice anything and anyone that they need to in order to get to him."

The picture of Sirius falling behind the veil and Cedric in the graveyard flashed through Harry's mind. He remembered that Death Eater cursing Hermione and Ron falling into the pool of brains. He thought of Ginny, Neville, and Luna fighting beside him and said, "I don't want to sacrifice anyone else in order to kill Voldemort."

"Anyone?" Christine asked, looking innocently curious more than anything else.

Harry thought about the DoM. "I suppose I'd sacrifice myself if it meant—well, I'd have collapsed the building if it meant killing him, even if I was stuck there too. But if my friends were there—I don't know. I don't think I could."

Christine reached out and grabbed his hand. "That's why you'll win."

"Because I'm foolish?" Harry asked, feeling just that after his little speech.

"Because you have something to fight for," Christine said. "Think of Mad-eye Moody. Matt said you know him." Harry nodded. "By 1981, he was willing to kill a dozen students if it meant bringing down

Voldemort. Curse first, check facts later, that was Moody. Crouch was the same, sacrificing freedoms and rights in the desperate attempt to end the war however he could.”

Sirius hadn’t received a trial because of Crouch. That man had sent his own son to prison for life without batting an eye. Harry remembered watching him in Dumbledore’s Pensieve and their exchanges at the Quidditch World Cup: he was a cold, proper man who expected excellence from everyone. He liked order and neatness, but most of all he liked controlling that order.

“You know, you’re really very little like the boy I raised. I kept telling Matt that you were different, but he said it was hormones and a bad break up. I bothered him about it for a while, but he always had an excuse: Harry’s maturing, he has Quidditch pressure, a Basilisk attacked the school, things like that.”

“You told him I wasn’t a self-centered brat anymore?” Harry asked, leaning his head against the high backs of the chairs.

“I told him that you dodged my Translation Spell as if it were a reflex for you to avoid spells. Told him you looked a bit like we did in the late seventies, when we kept expecting Voldemort to walk in our front door,” Christine said. “Dodging the spell was one of the first moments, but then there were little things. Like this.” She waved vaguely in his direction. “I’ve never seen my son sit like that before.”

Harry looked down at himself and felt rather foolish for doing so. “Like what?”

“Like he didn’t want anyone to notice him,” Christine said. “You naturally draw people’s eye like he did-- when you walked into that the Great Hall when we came to visit, everyone noticed-- but it’s different. With him, he wanted people to love him. With you, the attention you draw seems to be a result of a quiet intensity that I’m starting to think might be a bit of self-hatred. And then you sat quietly at the Gryffindor table beside Naomi and had a comfortable conversation that you only meant for the two of you to hear as you tried not to notice people watching you.”

Harry felt uncomfortable talking this much about himself, but tried to sit up and dispel some of the more unsettling things she said. Christine shook her head and patted his hand softly.

"I go back to Hogwarts tomorrow," Harry said to fill the quiet.

"And I'll miss you every moment," Christine said, reaching over to pat his hand gently before standing and looking out into the dark Quidditch field. After a moment, Harry stood too. "But you're too big for this house, son of mine, too big for this world, I think."

"I'm not too big for anything, I just have to help," Harry said.

Christine focused her attention on him, her soft brown eyes taking him in. "You really do remind me of your mother more and more each day."

Harry looked at the ground.

"I'm sorry I let you down," Christine said, stepping up and hugging Harry.

"You didn't." He didn't know quite how to hug her back, so instead he reveled in the feel of a mother's hug one last time.

Before he fell asleep that night, Harry lay awake for several hours in the dark. It was probably a result of his years in the cupboard, but Harry always found dark places comforting and darkness a welcome state.

Chapter 13

Time for Answers

After Harry woke and dressed, he went downstairs and found Matt and Alana having breakfast at the little round table to the side of the kitchen. Matt's paper lay beside his plate as Alana babbled about school that day and how her friend Rebecca liked a boy named Gregory, but that Gregory had thrown mud at her the day before so she was crying because her dress was ruined.

"I'm sure after her mother cleans it, the dress will be as good as new," Matt said as Harry wandered over to the kitchen counter where there were two plates sitting out, one of eggs and the other of bacon.

"She's a Muggle, Dad," Alana said earnestly. "They don't clean clothes. She has to buy a new dress now." Harry snickered a bit as he grabbed a plate and scooped food onto it. If only Aunt Petunia could have heard that comment.

"Muggles can clean clothes, Alana," Matt said patiently.

"No," she replied sincerely. Harry turned in time to see her shaking her head rather empathically, pigtails swinging. "Jennifer told me that they just put them in water and buy new ones."

"Jennifer was mistaken," Matt said, smiling softly at his little girl.

"What's mistaken?" Alana asked, taking a big bite.

"Wrong."

Alana's big brown eyes widened as she chewed the forkful of eggs in her mouth. After she'd swallowed them, she said, "Jennifer's never wrong. Plus, her aunt's a squib. She knows."

"Then she was teasing you," Matt said. Harry thought it was more likely that the girl was lying or thought she was right.

Alana laughed and said, "Jennifer wouldn't tease me, Dad."

“Muggles don’t just throw out their dirty clothes. They have machines that clean them or they do it by hand. So either Jennifer didn’t know about the machines or she was teasing you,” Matt said, focusing on the primary issue of clean clothing.

Alana was poised to respond, but Harry cut her off, saying, “It’s true.”

Alana’s mouth fell open as she twisted to see him. “It is?”

Harry never failed to find it odd that the little girl trusted him more than her own parents, but he went ahead and said, “The machines aren’t very big, and they do fill with water like Jennifer said, but Muggles take the clothes out after a while.”

“How do they dry?” Alana asked, focused so thoroughly on learning this information that she ignored the food and drink in front of her.

“They hang them on a line.” Harry shrugged and Matt took a couple of bites of toast as he looked curiously at Harry.

“Doesn’t that take forever?” Alana asked.

“Not too long.” Harry remembered collecting the hanging clothes from his aunt’s line. It had been one of his easiest chores, though Aunt Petunia often spent the entire time telling him how he was doing it incorrectly.

“Wow,” Alana said, taking all of this information in. Harry ate some bacon. “Wait ‘till I tell Jennifer!”

Matt laughed kindly and reminded her to finish her breakfast, which she did in the next ten seconds. Then he addressed Harry, saying, “Are you packed up to leave?”

“What?” Alana exclaimed, dropping her fork. Once the fork fell on the plate, since the food had all been eaten, it floated over to the sink and began to wash itself.

“Harry’s going back to school in a couple of hours,” Matt explained. Harry watched the plate clean itself until a squeaking sound from Alana made him turn to face her.

Alana’s eyes began to fill as she said, “But that’s soon!”

Something twisted in Harry’s chest as he saw this tiny girl looking at him with her big brown eyes. She looked mad and sad, like she thought Harry had tricked her somehow. Harry hated seeing her like that. It reminded him of the way Hermione looked at King’s Cross at the end of the year, but here he could not promise to see Alana soon or write her owls. It would be a lie. He planned to go back to his world.

Luckily, Harry was saved having to answer by Matt, who went to kneel in front of his daughter and said, “Harry’s just going back to school like he does every year.”

“But he came home,” Alana said, a fat tear running down her cheek. “I thought he’d stay.”

“He can’t, pumpkin,” Matt said, wiping her tear away with his thumb.

“Why?” Alana asked, rubbing her eyes.

“He has important things to do,” Christine answered, stepping into the room. Alana just shook her head. “He has exams to take and friends to see.”

“But we’re his family. I’m his sister. That’s better than a friend. You said so.” Alana turned to Harry. “I won’t make you fly with me anymore. I won’t bother you or ask you questions or make you have tea with my dolls. I’ll be quiet. Don’t go back.”

Matt looked sympathetically at Harry, and Christine seemed to be saying something, but Harry’s brain was completely focused on the child sitting in the adult chair in front of him. Alana was shaking and crying, but he couldn’t think past the fact that she thought of herself as his sister, though in his own world he would not have been able to pick her out of a crowd. She was the first person he had seen in this world, grabbing his hand and dragging him down into her kitchen.

She was the one who sat on his lap and repeatedly asked him the question that rooted him in reality: why? And right then she was crying for him, wanting and begging him to stay. No one had ever done that for him before, never asked him to come home to stay forever. The Dursleys hardly gave him a month.

He knew he should say something to comfort her, but he couldn't think of anything comforting. "I'm sorry."

Alana just cried harder.

So Harry asked, "Want to go flying?"

Alana shook her head. "I don't want to fly. I want you to stay."

Harry thought about Hermione and Ron, Ginny and Neville. He thought about the Chamber of Secrets and Remus and Sirius. "I can't."

"Why?" she asked stubbornly. Harry smiled. She reminded him vaguely of Hermione.

"I don't know," he said, and at that moment, it was true.

"If you don't know"—she crossed her arms—"then why are you going?"

It took Harry a moment to think of the answer, but then he looked at Christine and Matt before focusing on Alana. "Because it's where I belong."

"Why?" Alana asked, beginning to shriek. "The Stump is home!"

"When you go to Hogwarts in a couple of years, you'll understand," Matt said, taking his daughter's hand.

Christine nodded as she walked over and kissed the top of Alana's head. "True."

“No, I won’t! I want him to stay!” Alana kept crying and yelling and looking at Harry. Matt motioned for Harry to leave the room. He did so, listening to the shrieks as he went, and then stood in the backyard quietly for a while.

The weather was the worst sort of Quidditch weather: overcast so completely that the day was in perpetual gray. Both light and dark objects were difficult to discern, both bludgers and the snitch. Not to mention that players occasionally blended right in with the background, resulting in more than a few collisions. The sky had been like this during a particularly horrible Care of Magical Creatures lesson in third year, Harry remembered. And then he thought about how far away third year suddenly seemed.

“It’s hard,” Christine said, walking out after a minute.

Harry turned to watch the tall woman approach. “What is?”

“Watching my children hurt,” Christine said. Harry and she looked at one another as he remembered Mrs. Crouch saying something similar at the hospital the day before. “Alana raised hell September 1st too. We had left her at Tracy’s for the night so that we could take you boys to King’s Cross without the normal protests. She’s done this every year since you started, just as Andrew and Stephen did when they weren’t allowed to go. Just as you did.”

“Me?” Harry repeated, confused because this version of himself was the oldest McGrath child and therefore would have been the first to leave. “When did I complain?”

“You cried when Naomi started Hogwarts,” Christine informed him.

“I didn’t want her to go?” Harry asked, still not understanding. Everyone had treated them as bitter enemies when he first arrived. Why would this version of him have been sad to see her go?

“No, you didn’t whine because she was leaving, you whined because you couldn’t go with her. You were always the adventurous one, wanting to try new things before anyone else,” she said. “Which is

why you insisted on trying out for the Junior League team two summers ago.”

“And why you had me hike with you around Rome,” Harry said, remembering the day they stood on top of the Colosseum, having opened the safety gates and climbed the fading stairs.

“True,” Christine said, smiling at him. Rome felt like a dream, the vacation he’d never had with the Dursleys. He remembered the villa and eating dinner with the Ryans, Andrew, and Stephen. He remembered Christine and Matt playing a round of pick-up Quidditch with all of the kids.

“I’m going to— you know— miss this.” Harry waved his hand around. He wondered if she understood that he meant both the house and (even more) the family that had let him live with them there. Christine nodded.

“So have you figured it out yet?” Christine asked, leaning on the arm of the lawn chair.

“Figured what out?” Harry asked.

“Who your secret keeper is,” Christine said. “That’s the only way to leave, right? And if you’re already saying goodbye then I thought you’d know your secret keeper.”

“Oh, er,” Harry said, feeling like he did when he’d first admitted to Hermione that he had absolutely no idea what the second Tri-Wizard challenge would be.

Christine looked surprised. “You haven’t?”

“It’s complicated,” he mumbled.

“Liar,” she said.

“What?” Harry gaped, staring at the casual woman. “Do you know who it is?”

"It wasn't hard," Christine said. "I suppose I could be wrong, but I'm not."

"How can you be sure?" Harry asked skeptically.

Christine looked at him steadily. "I know about secret keepers."

"You didn't know Sirius switched with Peter," Harry pointed out.

"No," Christine said slowly, "I didn't know about them."

Harry saw that she was slipping into her memories and asked, "Then how can you know who mine would be?"

"Because it's the only person you'd ask to be your secret keeper," she said simply.

"What do you mean by that? I didn't choose this person," Harry said. "Robert picked the one I'd trust."

"Meaning he picked the one you'd choose if you were doing a Fidelius Charm," Christine said, rolling her eyes like that was obvious.

"That's not true," Harry said. "I'd have picked Ron or Hermione."

Christine raised her eyebrows. "And they are?"

"My best friends!" Harry exclaimed.

"They're your best friends from that other world," Christine pointed out. "And even there, you probably wouldn't have chosen them. They'd be too obvious. Like Sirius. Besides, you don't even know these versions of them that well. Why would you choose them?"

Harry still didn't get it. "What does this version of them matter?"

"Well, this is the version that has to know about your natural world, right? So you'd have to trust this version of them," Christine said matter-of-factly.

That added a whole new level to this hunt, and a new way of tackling the problem. Harry would just have to think about whom he would choose from among the people in this world.

"I would have chosen you," Harry said suddenly. "Or Matt."

Christine shook her head. "Why? We couldn't relate to you."

Harry was just as frustrated right now as he had been at the beginning of this ridiculous trip.

Christine pushed off from the chair and went up to embrace him. Holding him at arm's length afterward, she said, "Do me a favor."

Thoughts still tangled up on his secret keeper, Harry said, "Sure."

"Don't be angry with me," Christine said.

Focusing on her, Harry asked, "Why would I be angry?"

"When you go back to your world and you go out to find me and realize why I didn't take you in, don't be angry with me."

"The Ministry probably wouldn't let you," Harry said. At least, that's what he had assumed had been the reason why she hadn't taken him in. Christine nodded, but she also started crying and Harry had absolutely no idea what to do about that so he ended up with the old teenage-boy stand by: staring awkward and hoping it would end soon.

"I was proud to be your mother these fifteen years." Christine gave him a broken smile. "I know you aren't very pleased with the way you turned out when I raised you, but I loved you and I was proud of you. This version of you was wonderful, fun, an adventurer to the end. You were just a normal sixteen year old boy."

Harry had never realized that by insulting himself he was judging Matt and Christine. He felt very foolish and so he said the one thing he knew to be true: "This version of me was happy here."

Christine smiled sadly, and reached out to touch his shoulder. "If only you could have been too."

Harry looked down at her hand. "I don't belong here."

Christine sniffed and dropped her hand, putting on a brave face. "I know. Actually, I don't know. I know you think you belong with your horrid aunt and her fat husband and fat child, but I write them every year and they never respond. Well, they did once, but a restraining order isn't really a response, you know? So I'm trying not to be angry about the fact that you have to go back, but it is so very hard to see my children hurt, and those people didn't seem to treat you well."

"Some of them did, and even if they didn't, that isn't a reason to run away."

"Of course it is, you're just being stubborn," Christine said, but she was smiling to show that she was joking. She became serious as she added, "Still, I know that you have to fight Voldemort. It's your destiny. And unfortunately, I don't think you can beat him unless you were raised in your world, where you were marked and connected to him."

"What?" Harry asked, flabbergasted.

"You were born as the seven month dies," Christine said, wiping her hands on her long skirt and standing straighter. "So you have to face a war from which I want nothing more than to protect you."

"How do you know about that?" No one knew about that. Only Harry and Dumbledore, right?

"Your dad told me on that day I wished for, when we were all happy. He and Lily had just found out about it and they were heartbroken to think of the responsibility you would have. James wanted Lily to have someone she could talk to." Christine smiled and let the subject drop. "Don't forget not to hate me."

"I could never hate you," Harry promised with a fierceness that he hadn't intended to use.

“What if I threw two goats on you?” Christine asked.

Harry paused. “What?”

“Well, would you hate me then?” Christine asked simply. “I could do something unforgivable. Or something forgivable that feels unforgivable when it happens so that for a day or a week or a month you hate me until it passes. I’m just trying to say that you shouldn’t make promises about the future.”

“I think I could forgive you if you threw goats at me,” Harry said, smirking.

“Good, because that’s your Christmas present this year,” Christine said, eyes still reflecting her sadness despite the smile on her lips. Neither wanted to admit that Harry wouldn’t be home for Christmas.

It took almost no time to pack since Christine insisted on both using magic and doing Harry’s packing herself. Besides which, he hadn’t brought much clothing with him. It took considerably more time to convince Alana to stop pouting and say a proper goodbye to Harry before he was supposed to Floo to Hogsmeade.

Tearstains on her face, Alana shuffled up and said, “Dad said I couldn’t ask you to stay.”

Harry nodded. “All right.”

“But even if I don’t ask, if you do stay, I’ll be happier,” she said quickly.

“Alana,” Matt said warningly. She crossed her arms and stubbornly refused to look at him as she focused on Harry.

“I’ll see you again,” Harry said, to comfort both her and himself.

“But you’re going back to Hogwarts?” she asked, eyes watering.

Please don't cry. Please don't cry, Harry thought. "For a while. I'll find you afterward."

"I'm not hiding," she said, blinking a lot.

"I know." Harry tried to remember exactly what she looked like, the little daredevil that flew top-speed toward the broom shed and squealed with delight when Harry performed the Wronski Feint inches from her head.

"Say goodbye now," Matt said gently.

"No," Alana said, turning to stubbornly look at her father as she crossed her arms and stomped her foot.

"Alana." Matt managed to use her name as a reprimand and command at once. It was a uniquely parental gift and reminded Harry of Mrs. Weasley saying Ron, Ginny, and especially, Boys to Fred and George.

The six-year-old girl grumbled but finally turned back to Harry, looking at him pleadingly for a long moment before flinging herself at him, wrapping her arms around his waist. Harry slouched and patted her back before rearranging the situation so that he was kneeling and hugging her properly.

"Goodbye, Harry," she whispered, hugging him fiercely, her little arms wrapped around his neck.

"Goodbye, Alana." Harry squeezed her a bit but she was so small that he worried about breaking her. After a long minute embracing, they both leaned back and Harry said, "I know something you can tell Jennifer that'll impress her."

Alana's eye lit up. "What?"

"Muggles have walked on the Moon," Harry said.

Alana gasped. "The Moon?"

Harry nodded. "Yep."

"That's far."

"Very."

"Wow." She looked at him in wonder. "How?"

Harry wanted to say 'spaceship' and leave it at that, but he knew Alana well enough by then to know that she'd never accept that explanation without further details, so he cheated a bit and said, "You'll have to ask someone else."

Alana nodded, imagining how surprised Jennifer would be, no doubt. She said goodbye one last time and ran out of the room.

"That was a clever distraction," Matt said, smiling.

Harry stood and shrugged. "I guess."

Hermione and Ron had gotten into a huge argument in third year when Hermione mentioned that Muggles had been to the Moon and Ron refused to believe her, which is what had made Harry think to tell Alana.

"I know you're getting older all the time and probably aren't much for hugs anymore, but since this is a special occasion and all, what with you being able to go back to school instead of being expelled, I thought I might give it a try," Matt said in his friendly voice, sounding like he was inviting Harry to smile at his joke about the suspension, but thinking about the suspension made Harry think of Peter Pettigrew, Remus, and Sirius, which just made him sad. Harry's anger had died somewhere between the Stump and St. Mungo's.

Matt embraced Harry and wished him well on the trip back to school and in all of the detentions he would undoubtedly have to do as a result of his actions.

"I just want to say—er, thank you," Harry said.

“For?” Matt asked, tilting his head to the side.

“For everything,” Harry said, thinking about the way that Matt had taken part of the blame for what happened to Sirius and the way Matt never once scolded Harry for his expulsion, thinking of the Gringott’s key Matt had given him and the pictures of his parents that Matt had so obviously loved.

“You never need to say thank you.” He embraced Harry briefly one more time. In parting, Matt said, “I don’t know what happened to you at the beginning of this year and I don’t know what you had to work out, but I’m glad you’ve found your answers.”

Harry glanced at Christine, but nodded and thanked Matt, who said, “I’ll see you at Christmas.”

The tall dark-blond-haired man left Harry after squeezing his shoulder.

Harry turned to Christine and said in wonder, “You didn’t tell him.”

“I will. Eventually,” Christine said. “Maybe.”

“Why not tell him now?” Harry wanted to know. She and Matt seemed to share everything with one another, stories, secrets, and information. It was so odd to think of her keeping anything from him, even for such a short amount of time.

“He’ll be upset,” Christine said.

“Because you aren’t telling him?”

“No, because we didn’t take you in and there’s only one reason why we wouldn’t have done that and it would be his fault.” Christine took a deep breath. “And he doesn’t need to hurt like that just yet.”

“Why didn’t you take me in?” Harry couldn’t help but ask.

“I probably did something stupid,” Christine said, stepping forward to hold him tightly for a moment and kiss his cheek. Harry wondered

how, if she said she'd done something stupid, she thought Matt was to blame for not taking him in, but he let the thought slip away.

"Thanks for everything," Harry said.

Christine smiled, holding him at arms' length. "There's no way they deserve you."

"Who?"

"Anyone. Everyone."

Harry grinned, despite the protest that he instinctively felt. "Goodbye, Christine."

"Goodbye, Harry."

She handed him the Floo powder and he threw it into the fire, shouting, "Honeydukes." Then he stepped out of the Stump and into the fire, a shrunken trunk in his pocket. He had completely forgotten to ask her who his secret keeper was.

Coming back to school was considerably less pleasant than any similar trip Harry had ever made. First, he traveled by Floo, possibly his least favorite method of travel ever. Second, McGonagall had escorted him up to the castle spending the majority of the time lecturing him on the various additional punishments that he would have to accept, including being stripped of his prefect badge and locked into a month's worth of detentions. In short, it was going to be a great time.

"Your detentions will be every night from seven to nine. Understood?" McGonagall asked.

"Yes." Harry looked down at the place on his hand where he knew he should have had a scar that read I will not tell lies. Detention no longer scared him.

"You must understand that your actions have consequences, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said primly.

Harry wanted nothing more than to go back to the Stump, to fly with Alana and eat cookie dough with Christine as Matt half-heartedly told them off. But Harry then thought about the moment in third year when he told Remus and Sirius not to kill Peter. He thought about the graveyard near Riddle manor at the end of his fourth year, and how he needed to go back to his own world.

"Professor," Harry said, deciding to take a chance and being unable to remember if he had done this before, "do you remember a different world?"

"Excuse me?"

"It's just," Harry said, "I'm not from here, and I need to get back."

McGonagall shot him a look. "I hope it would seem obvious by now that I do not approve of pranks."

It was nice to know that McGonagall treated him the same in both worlds: like a student who was a bit too slow. "Yes, I certainly do know that."

McGonagall nodded curtly. "And Professor Dumbledore would like to see you in his office when you return."

Harry nodded to show he understood, but his thoughts were a thousand miles away with a family he wished he could have had.

The Headmaster was waiting behind his desk when Harry arrived, looking expectant. Harry mentally prepared himself for yet another round of 'here's what you did wrong and how I'll react.' But then he remembered that Dumbledore never spoke to him like that. He and Lupin had both used guilt against Harry whenever he really stepped out of line. Guilt and silence. Like what he was hearing at this moment.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Harry said, deciding to prompt the beginning of this awkward conversation. The last time they had been in a room together, Harry had left shell-shocked and resentful, knowing that this Dumbledore was not his own, knowing he didn't trust him.

Dumbledore nodded. "I would like to know more about the world you are from."

"You believe me now?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore said, "I am willing to consider the possibility."

"Why?" Harry asked, wondering if the headmaster was putting him on.

"Because Peter Pettigrew was spotted at a Death Eater meeting a few days ago, verifying your story."

"You didn't catch him, then," Harry said, surprised to find that he was less bitter than he thought he'd be. It was his own fault Pettigrew got away in the first place and he couldn't bring himself to blame anyone else for failing to apprehend him.

Dumbledore shook his head. "But the knowledge that he is alive changes a great many things."

"Yes," Harry said.

"I apologize for not listening to you more carefully when you first brought this subject to my attention," Dumbledore said, hands folded so delicately on his desk.

"I told you about the prophecy and the Order," Harry pointed out, "and you didn't believe me until you had visual proof?"

"Would you have believed such a story, even knowing that someone knew things they should not have?" Dumbledore asked.

Damn. "No. I guess I wouldn't."

"But I should have," Dumbledore said. For the first time, Harry saw how truly old the headmaster was, how tired and worn. He wondered briefly if Dumbledore had hidden this side of himself from Harry or if Harry just hadn't taken the time to notice before. It made him remember something Christine had told him, Dumbledore has fought his battles. He's more tired than anyone.

Harry looked away. "It wouldn't have mattered since you're not the secret keeper."

"It would have made your stay easier, I suspect." Dumbledore met his gaze with soft eyes. "I heard you visited your parents."

Harry nodded, trying hard not to dwell on the guilt he felt for putting his parents in St. Mungo's. He remembered Christine saying that his parents were too big for anywhere, and he didn't know if that were true, but he certainly knew they didn't belong in that hospital room. Not that Neville's parents did either, but... it was just all so confusing.

"I am still unclear about how you came to this world," Dumbledore said, not exactly asking the question but obviously wanting some answers. This time, Harry was willing to give them.

"I made a wish and a genie brought me here," Harry said, thinking it sounded insane.

Dumbledore nodded, eyes brightening. "Curious."

He reminded Harry of Mr. Ollivander right then. "Curious?"

Dumbledore flipped a hand out and gestured toward his walls. "Yes. It's curious that this would be the world you most wished to live in."

Harry shrugged again, feeling a bit useless. "Well, it isn't really. It's just a jumping off point or something like that, a place where I can figure out what I really want."

"You must be something very special in your world to be given such a gift of time."

Harry looked at the sleeping portraits. "I'm not exactly on the English Junior Quidditch Team or anything."

"But you knew about the Order and the Prophecy, and I suspect you had a scar above your right eye," Dumbledore said.

"I had a lot of scars," Harry said noncommittally, thinking of his hand with the words from Umbridge and his arm where Pettigrew stabbed him. He had a scab on his left ankle from that time Aunt Marge's dog bit through to the bone and a burn mark on his stomach that he couldn't remember receiving.

"Have you enjoyed staying with the McGraths?" Dumbledore asked, pulling Harry out of his thoughts.

"How do you know I don't live with them in my world?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore looked steadily at him for a moment. "Because I would never allow it."

Harry managed to avoid huffing in response. "That I know."

"If your situation were anything like Neville's, then you would have been safest with your relatives," Dumbledore said. It was the same old spiel, but Harry couldn't help but shake his head thinking of Neville being forced to live in a house that he may have hated. "You mentioned knowing Tom Riddle."

"He tried to kill me," Harry said easily. "I'm sure it's happened to Neville."

"Not that he knows of."

"Well, then our situations were a little different," Harry said.

"You saw Voldemort then?"

Harry nodded as he thought back on the graveyard in Little Hangleton and the lobby of the Ministry. "He liked to gloat."

"Tom always has a sense of theatrics," Dumbledore said. "Naming his followers Death Eaters was a particularly inventive touch."

'Inventive' wasn't so much what Harry would call it as 'sadistic,' but it seemed somewhat appropriate.

Harry couldn't help but ask, "Do you hate the version of me in this world?"

Dumbledore looked briefly surprised. "No. Mr. Potter is a good, intelligent student with the rare ability to make everyone around him feel happy."

Harry crossed his arms and leaned back. "Right, but you didn't exactly trust what you thought of as his word about the Chamber."

"Mr. Potter also has a penchant for practical jokes," Dumbledore said. "Not unlike his father."

Without thinking, Harry replied, "My father also hung students upside-down occasionally and my version of you never called me anything other than Harry, so I guess we all have our own ways of seeing people."

Dumbledore sighed. "I never knew you very well, Harry."

"Forget it," Harry said dismissively. He was too emotionally drained to care. "I'm going back to my world anyway."

"You are?" Dumbledore asked. "Why?"

"Because I owe it to my parents to respect their sacrifice," Harry said.

"Are you unhappy with the McGraths?"

"No," Harry said, exasperated. "Not exactly. Not because of them."

"But you are unhappy?" Dumbledore asked again. Harry shrugged. "I only wondered about the vehemence of your desire to return to your

world. I assumed it had to do with your trip home.” Dumbledore managed to avoid naming that ‘trip’ a suspension.

“If anything, I’ve been unhappy learning more about me,” Harry said. “Despite what you say, I seemed to be quit a prat, caught up in being famous and having important friends. This version of me had a family that I would have loved and fought with them all the time.”

“You’re leaving in order to avoid becoming this version of Harry Potter?”

“I’m leaving for a lot of reasons,” Harry said.

“Was there a particular event that effected your choice?” Dumbledore asked. “Perhaps meeting your parents.”

Harry straightened again. “Seeing my parents had a lot to do with it and talking to Christine, but mainly it was watching you all go into the Chamber of Secrets without me.”

“You didn’t want to miss the adventure.”

“No.” Harry was beginning to realize that maybe Dumbledore wasn’t so good at intuiting. Or he simply could not accept that the Harry sitting in front of him was not the Harry Potter of this world. “I just hated that I couldn’t help.”

Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose. “In your world you went into the Chamber alone?”

“Oh. No. Ron went with me, and Professor Lockhart, though he was a useless man who blew up a wall and erased his own memory.” Harry didn’t really want to talk about all of that. He vaguely remembered sitting in Dumbledore’s office explain it for nearly a half hour and how his throat hurt afterward. It had been a long time ago. A lifetime or more ago. “I called Fawkes and pulled the sword of Gryffindor out of the Sorting Hat.”

Dumbledore eyes lit up again as he twisted in his seat to see the sword in the case behind his desk. Harry eyed it too, wondering why

he had been able to use it so effectively when he was twelve and untrained in fighting. But maybe he hadn't used it effectively. He had dropped it a couple of times. And in the end it was the Basilisk fang that he'd used to stab the diary. Speaking of which...

"Have you found Riddle's diary yet?" Harry asked.

"Yes, we have," Dumbledore said. "A second year Ravenclaw had it. We destroyed it."

Harry nodded, relieved. "Good."

After a bit more catching up, Harry decided it was time to leave. Dumbledore told him that he would be serving his detentions with Professor Lupin in his office every night and gave him leave to go. Harry couldn't help but feel that detention with Lupin was like a gift in itself, an opportunity to amend his relationship with the werewolf. The headmaster merely nodded.

Harry arrived at his dorm room after curfew. Everyone was already asleep and so he slipped into bed and lay there for hours, unable to sleep, wishing he were home already. At least then he could be back with his friends, the ones who really knew him. He didn't know if he actually fell asleep or not, but when the other boys rose to start the day, Harry joined them. All of their faces froze when they saw him, and Harry remembered that he had been suspended because he'd attacked Ron.

"Morning, Harry," Neville said, a note of warning in his voice directed at the other boys. "When did you get back?"

"Last night," Harry replied, standing.

Neville nodded. "Good to have you back."

Dean and Seamus nodded and turned to the bathroom. Neville clapped him on the shoulder as he went to join them, leaving Ron

and Harry together. Harry was surprised that Neville was sticking by his side when everyone else seemed so hesitant.

Ron was rubbing his arm absentmindedly, and Harry gestured at it. "You all right?"

Ron nodded. "Pomfrey fixed it."

Harry nodded too. "Good."

"I'm dating Parvati," Ron said suddenly. "I thought I'd tell you now since you've already cursed me and I figure we're even."

Harry smiled. "You're joking, right?"

Ron glared and shook his head. "Didn't think she'd lower her standards to me?"

"Nothing like that," Harry said, waving his hand dismissively, only then remembering Ron's hostile attitude toward Harry. "I just think that cursing you was much worse than you dating my ex-girlfriend. I mean, I'm grateful that you don't mind that much, but still."

"Well, your curse was accidental," Ron allowed.

Harry nodded. "I don't remember it happening."

Ron shifted his weight from foot to foot. "The twins wrote me about your visit."

"What did they have to say?"

"Just some stuff about Scabbers and Peter Pettigrew. I would have thought it was a prank or something, but Fred swore they were being serious, and I talked to the headmaster about all of it and he said it was true too," Ron said. Harry and the twins had always gotten along rather well, ever since Harry joined the team his first year. He hoped that they were still close in this world. "Did they catch him?"

Harry shook his head.

"I'm sure they will, though," Ron said, offering an overture of friendship. "Meantime, we should probably go to breakfast."

Ron dressed, brushed his teeth, and headed out then. Harry went through the same motions, realizing that it was that easy for Ron to believe that if Pettigrew were caught, the whole world would be right. This Ron hadn't been in the Shrieking Shack or seen Pettigrew transform into Scabbers and run off.

"Ready to go, Harry?" Neville stood in the doorway waiting.

Harry nodded and joined him, missing his friends fiercely.

When they arrived at breakfast the hall went briefly quiet before swelling with noise. Neville and Harry sat in the middle of the Gryffindor table and tried to ignore the stares. Neville glared back at them.

"Angry?" Harry asked.

"They all thought I was Slytherin's heir and turned their backs on me at the drop of a hat," Neville said. "There's no way I'm letting them turn on you like that too."

That surprised Harry. "Why not?"

Neville looked curiously at him for a moment before looking at his oatmeal. "You stuck by me."

Harry smiled sadly. At last this Neville was changing and becoming the man that Harry knew in his own universe. Andy and Stevie came over to welcome Harry back, asking about their parents and Alana, jokingly saying how Harry was lucky to have had a weeklong break from school. The Ryan sisters came over too to show their support, but Harry's attention was on the girl studiously avoiding his eye as she buried her face in a book.

“Excuse me,” Harry said to the people around him as he stood and walked over to his best friend.

“Hermione?” He asked. She looked up with panic in her eyes, though there was no surprise. She’d noticed him approaching. Harry made to sit. “You all right?”

“You can’t just come over and talk to me!” Hermione exclaimed a bit hysterically. “You attacked another student!”

Harry stopped mid-way to sitting. “And you’ve hit Malfoy, I really don’t think—”

“I’d never hit a fellow student! Ever!” Hermione was definitely attracting attention now. The students closer to them had stopped talking in order to stare.

“But you did—”

“No. I’m not your Hermione,” she said, slamming her book closed. “I’ve never fought a mountain troll. I’ve never lied to a professor. I’ve not been petrified and I can’t fathom my parents letting me return to school after hearing that a student died while supposedly under the school’s protection. I’m terrified of the idea of You-Know-Who returning. I’m not brave, Harry. I just read books well and make good marks. So just stop looking at me like that, like I ought to be different. Stop being frustrated. From what you’ve told me, you’re the reason I’m nothing like I should be. So get used to this version of me because it’s here to stay.”

Hermione stood to storm off when suddenly the room froze. Hermione in particular froze in an impossible position, hand boosting herself off the bench and one foot in the air as she clutched her book to her chest. She could not have maintained that pose for very long on her own strength. Harry glanced around frantically, noticing people frozen drinking orange juice and some stopped mid-step as they hurried to their morning classes. Dumbledore had a fork in his mouth and Snape was glaring at Sprout as she said something. Even the flickering candles were no longer flickering. Even the clouds on the ceiling were locked in place.

In fact, the only thing in the entire Hall that moved beside Harry himself was a youngish looking fellow in Muggle clothes. Robert.

“I need your answer now,” Robert said, looking expectantly at Harry from where he stood casually between the Slytherin and Ravenclaw tables.

Chapter 14

Robert

The used book salesman was standing in the middle of the Great Hall as if he had just Apparated in, but Harry knew that wasn't possible. Then again, he also thought it was impossible to freeze an entire room. So apparently, anything could really happen.

"What the hell is this?" Harry finally blurted out, sweeping his arm to indicate the frozen room.

"A moment in time extended," Robert said with his usual amount of aplomb. He grabbed a piece of turkey from a plate and smelled it before throwing it back. "I'd have thought you could figure that out on your own."

"How did you do this?" Harry asked, perfectly willing to admit that this entire thing was beyond scary. If Robert was able to freeze an entire room, what was to stop him from killing all of them while they were unable to react? What was to stop him from doing whatever he wanted?

"I made this world, Harry. It makes sense that I control it, doesn't it?" Robert said condescendingly. He was a couple of meters away, leaning against the back of a frozen Ravenclaw that Harry couldn't name.

"No, it bloody well doesn't make any sense!" Harry yelled. "You could destroy the world with this kind of power!"

"Only if someone wished it and only if I really wanted to, which I don't." Robert was still frustratingly calm, as if this were a situation he often found himself in, where he held the fates of hundreds of people in his hands.

"You can't just do this! You can't just stop all of their lives!" Harry exclaimed.

"I just did," Robert replied, pushing off the frozen boy and standing with his arms crossed. "Or rather, I took you out of time in order to have a conversation that didn't involve curious children or protective professors."

"You did all this to just talk to me?" Harry asked, dumbfounded.

"I don't really see why you're so impressed with this. In order to fulfill your wish, I destroyed an entire timeline and created a new one by moving you to another house, making Tom Riddle attack the Longbottoms, protecting the boy by freezing time, rearranging the room, and creating an artificial attack as I made him the boy-who-lived." Robert paused. "I'd think that would be rather more awe-inspiring."

"Who are you?" Harry asked, understanding for the first time what Christine had meant when she said that Robert was dangerous.

"We've already gone over that. Robert. Bookseller. Hate wasting time," he said, waving his hands to motion that they needed to speed up the conversation.

"You're a genie," Harry accused.

Robert shrugged. "You could call me that."

"How old are you?" It seemed so important right then to know more about the man in front of him.

"Twenty-six." Robert paused. Harry shot him a skeptical look. That couldn't be true if he'd really granted Christine her wish. "You expected someone ancient?"

Harry chose to ignore the lie. "So what? I have three wishes?"

Robert laughed. "Oh, Muggles, how ignorant they are. You have one wish. One true wish that's only granted if you speak it aloud. You already spoke yours."

"You said most people ask for revenge," Harry remembered, words tumbling out of his mouth before he had a chance to think about them, process them, process the situation.

Robert nodded. "They do."

"What would you have done if that was my wish?"

"I would have done the same thing I did to all the other malicious people who crossed my path," Robert said. Harry waited for him to elaborate. He didn't.

"That's not an answer," Harry said angrily.

"I was called to Tom Riddle, not too long ago, when he voiced his one true wish, that he could be invincible and live forever." Harry's eyes grew large. Robert looked completely casual. "Which seems like two wishes in one, but who am I to judge? So I made him a phoenix. Permanently. He was rather miffed, kept blowing himself up and being reborn in the ashes. Tried to start a bird revolution, which is actually quite hilarious to think about but was rather disturbing to witness. He kept biting off other birds' heads. Took him only a week to ask his secret keeper to change it back, and that was really funny because he couldn't talk to her and had to write it all out."

Harry's mouth dropped open. It took a moment for him to shut it and process the information given to him and ask, "Who was his secret keeper? Himself? He doesn't trust anyone."

"Don't be absurd, boy, you can't be your own secret keeper," Robert said with a wave of his hand. "There's a whole book of rules governing the secret keeper: they have to be the person the wisher would choose from the people in the new world, they need to be protected and kept alive, things like that."

"Who was his?" Harry repeated his question, ignoring Robert's long-suffering tone.

"Bellatrix Lestrange," Robert said casually, "who he didn't trust with his life, but did trust to do anything he might ask of her, including

undoing his wish. Even when she realized he was a phoenix, which, again, was hilarious.”

“You cheated.”

Robert shook his head and tapped the back of a boy’s shoulder with his finger. “Specifics, Harry, that’s where this business gets fun.”

“That’s what this is, bringing me to this world? My chance to be specific?” Harry asked. Robert nodded. “Why? Why would you give me that option when you didn’t give it to him?”

“I told you, Harry: I like you. For the first time in a long time, you made a wish I wasn’t ashamed to grant.” Robert looked briefly sad. “You didn’t think you’d really dealt with anything horrible. You still don’t. You asked that someone take the prophecy from you because you were sick of failing the people who looked to you to save them.”

“How would you know?” Harry asked, ignoring the fact that this man was obviously capable of feats beyond imagining.

“I know about wishes,” Robert said with a casual wave of his hand. “I’m not normally this blunt about what you yourself were feeling, but as you’ve become obsessed with the idea of finding and changing everything, I’ve decided to help you.” Robert put his hands in his pockets and waited.

“Undo this,” Harry said, pointing at Hannah Abbot, who was lifting a spoonful of porridge to her mouth. The frozen Great Hall unsettled him.

“We need to talk first,” Robert said.

Harry shook his head. “We have nothing to discuss.”

“That’s a rather ridiculous statement considering all of the things that we have just talked about, not to mention the things we really should talk about,” Robert said.

“Undo it!” Harry insisted, gesturing toward the entire table.

"I won't unfreeze this room and I can't undo your wish," Robert said. "But if you tell me who you want to replace you, I'll just start the new world up." He clapped and rubbed his hands together, looking expectantly at Harry.

"What do you mean you can't undo it?" Harry asked.

"That's a power only your secret keeper has." Robert was beginning to look impatient. "And since you haven't bothered to find her yet, I'm going to have to insist you name your replacement immediately."

"What? You want me to tell you right now?" Harry asked.

Robert made a show of looking around the Great Hall as if confused. "Could you imagine a better time?"

"It's only breakfast," Harry said, trying to stall.

"And?" Robert asked.

"Aren't important things like this supposed to happen at dinner?" Harry asked, thinking back on his personal experiences.

Robert rolled his eyes. "You are a constant source of misinformation about important decisions. I'm amused, but also rather alarmed, considering the fact that you are rather an expert at finding yourself in the midst of world-changing decisions."

"I'm not—"

Robert waved a hand as he interrupted him. "So what world do you want? One with Draco Malfoy as the Boy-Who-Lived? Maybe Severus Snape?"

"No!" The idea revolted Harry.

"Then who?" Robert was playing with him.

"I don't know yet," Harry said bitterly. "I need more time."

"Your time is running out," Robert said seriously.

"How can time be running out?" Harry asked. "You have the ability to stop it."

"I can only ask you on three different occasions, and then I need a real answer," Robert said. "That's probably where the three wishes theory came from, actually."

"What? Why?"

Robert shrugged. "Those are the rules."

"You make up the rules," Harry said, shaking a finger at him.

"Doesn't make it less necessary to follow them," Robert said. "So once more, Harry, are you ready to tell me who you want to replace you?"

"No. I'm not," Harry said.

Robert practically pursed his lips at Harry. "You're a stubborn one, aren't you?"

"What if I wanted to go back to my world?" Harry asked.

"Then you'd have to find your secret keeper rather quickly," Robert said, "because I can't give you that world back."

"You said that before, that you can't undo it," Harry said, "but I don't understand why."

"Because your wish wasn't to keep the world the same, it was for someone to replace you, and I don't have the ability to undo wishes, my job is to fulfill them." The bookseller looked around the room.

"That's bullshit."

"That's infinite power shaped by the wishes of morons," Robert corrected.

Harry shook his head. "I don't want it. I take back my wish."

"You can't," Robert said, rolling his eyes.

"Like hell I can't, it's my wish."

"And it's my obligation to make that wish come true," Robert said, finally angry. "Whether or not I want to, whether or not it's a particularly good one, my job is to make sure your one true wish is realized. It's a binding magical contract. I think you know a little something about that."

Harry bit his cheek to keep from screaming at the man that had the power to pause time. "I also know you're the one that made up the rules."

"No," Robert snapped. "These rules have been in effect since I was born into this job and they'll be here after I'm finally released, so stop being stubborn and make your choice. Then I'll erase your memory and make you believe you were there all along."

"No!" Harry yelled, repulsed by that idea. "I don't want that! I don't want any of this!"

"That's not my fault," Robert replied, enunciating clearly.

"I need time. "

"Who do you want?" Robert asked, continuing as if Harry hadn't spoken. "Dumbledore? McGonagall?" He turned to point to the people as he named them. "Lupin? Flitwick? Sprout? Hooch maybe? She'd be an interesting choice."

"No, none of them," Harry said quickly. Christine had said the replacement would have to be in Harry's generation and he'd believed her. "I don't know who yet, but none of them."

“What about Neville then?” Robert disappeared and reappeared next to that world’s Boy-Who-Lived. Neville was laughing, his mouth opened rather unflatteringly. “This world wasn’t so bad, was it? He did well as the hero.”

“No,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“Maybe Miss Granger then?” Robert asked, walking over to her frozen body. “It would be an unorthodox choice, of course, but I could—”

“Don’t you go anywhere near Hermione!” Harry shouted, wand in hand before he thought about it.

Robert looked curiously at him. “Do you really believe a wand could hurt me? Have you not read your texts? Genies are immune and have been for a millennium.”

“Then why are you involved at all?” Harry asked bitterly, not pocketing his wand even as he remembered trying and failing to disarm Robert when he’d first appeared.

“Because you called me to you with your wish.” Robert met Harry’s glare rather coolly. “So whom would you trust?”

“I don’t know.”

“What was wrong with Neville again?” Robert asked. “Was it that he was too famous or too full of himself?”

“Neither,” Harry spat the word. “I just didn’t want him going into the Chamber. He couldn’t have done it alone.”

“And who could, do you think?” Robert asked. “Ron?”

“No,” Harry muttered, absolutely sick at the thought of making Ron face all of the threats that had plagued Harry. He would die before he forced Ron to fight the Basilisk and the memory of Tom Riddle, before he let Ron enter Tri-Wizard tournament and fight his way out

of that graveyard. Harry would rather die than make Ron the target of Trelawney's prophecy and Voldemort's grudge.

"How about his little sister Ginny?" Robert asked.

"No!" His reply was faster, more adamant.

"Dumbledore, Lupin, and Snape went into the Chamber and came out alive. Were you relieved to stay in your safe little common room and send them to danger? Did you trust that they'd be able to handle the situation?"

"No," Harry said. They had only found the entrance and killed the Basilisk because of information that Harry had brought them from his own world, his own experience, experience that would apparently be erased from his memory once he chose a world. What a horrible situation.

Robert took a step toward him. "Then whom would you trust?"

Harry shook his head and tried to stall again. "I don't know—"

"A name, Harry," Robert insisted.

"I don't have one for you!"

"Then who would replace you? Maybe a stranger, some girl at Beauxbaton?"

"No!"

"Why not?" Robert asked, walking toward him. "It's not your problem anymore, right? Why do you care who replaces you? When we first met you said it could be anyone. Should I just take you at your word?"

Harry might once have said yes to spite the man, but after living in this world and really beginning to wonder who he would want to face his battles for him, Harry said, "No," and tried desperately to think his way out of this situation.

"You told me once that you didn't think you'd been through anything too horrible. Don't you think anyone could be lucky like you were?" Robert asked, goading Harry. "Who would you trust to do what you did?"

"Shut up!" Harry snapped.

"Just say it then. The one you trust. The one you'd—"

"No one!" Harry's mouth clamped shut after he said the words and he breathed heavily. Damn. After seeing his parents he had acknowledged that he needed to go back in order to honor their memories, but until this moment he hadn't really realized that he needed to go back for himself, too. "No one. I don't trust anyone."

Robert nodded. "I told you that you wouldn't really want just anyone to take your place, but that you only thought you did because you didn't really understand everything that you've dealt with in your life," Robert said in his calm, soothing voice that Harry hated. "But I think you understand now."

"Why? Because I'm here?" Harry asked, still angry.

"Because for the first time, you're seeing the situation from the outside. Your first year, you saved the stone—"

Harry shook his head and said, "Fat lot of good that did. It wasn't stolen in this world. Dumbledore's mirror protected it without three first years getting involved. So that was rather pointless of me to almost get killed."

Robert went on, "You killed the Basilisk—"

"Which Dumbledore did this year before Ginny was in danger."

"Only because of the information you gained from your ridiculous jaunt into the Chamber," Robert countered.

"Right," Harry said sarcastically.

"You saved an innocent man and animal from death."

"Only to force him to die two years later anyway," Harry muttered, thinking sadly of Sirius.

"You brought Cedric's body back."

"After I got him killed in the first place!" Harry exclaimed, looking up at Robert. "Everything good I've ever done, I have had to do because I made a huge mess first: I couldn't just leave the stone, couldn't just ask a professor to help with the Chamber, couldn't just let Sirius and Remus kill Wormtail, couldn't lose that damned Cup! It's just like Hermione said, I have a thing for saving people, and most times I end up killing them in the process."

"You lived for ten years in a cupboard under the stairs," Robert said, eyes boring into Harry's, "and still you found a way to love people."

"Oh, great," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "I'll love Voldemort to death."

"Don't be absurd, boy. You can't love that man." Robert looked back at Harry. "But you can love others."

"And get them killed," Harry muttered.

"Or save them, as your mother did you."

"And look where that got her!"

"Look where it got you." The man continued to stare at Harry expectantly. "You're so frustrating. You've seen this Neville, haven't you? Seen what fame could have done to you, what kind of person you could have become. Compare what happened to him after the Parseltongue incident with what you faced under the tutelage of Dolores Umbridge. He isn't strong enough to face Tom Riddle. He isn't independent enough. He would turn to Dumbledore even though, in the end, it has to be Neville."

"But it shouldn't be him in the end," Harry muttered.

Robert shook his head. "No. It should be you. And you know that too."

Harry wanted to fight the inevitable answer, to say that it could still be anyone, but now he knew the truth: he didn't want to force this life on anyone else. Besides, he trusted no one else with the burden.

"Why did you bring me here?" Harry asked. "If you knew it had to be me, why not just dump me in hell on Earth? Find a world where all of my family was dead, where I was dead or crazy?"

Robert shook his head. "Because you deserved better."

"Better?" Harry glared. "This is better? Showing me a place where I go to Rome with a family that loves me is better?"

"You think you'd rather have been sent to a world where you were a Death Eater? Would you rather I had created extraordinary circumstances that led your parents to be evil?" Robert asked, words dripping with distaste. "Would you rather I gave you no choice at all? You deserve more than that, Harry Potter. Whether or not you believe it to be true, you deserve more than that."

"This is not more than that," Harry said, pointing angrily at the floor. "This is a trick."

"This is real," Robert said, gesturing around the room. "Choosing between a life where you make a difference and a world where you are normal."

"Why this world?" Harry asked, voice almost breaking. "Why the McGraths?"

"I could change only one thing," Robert said, "and that was the person to replace you. I was limited by your own wish. I didn't choose the McGraths, they chose you."

Harry shook his head.

"I hate you for letting me believe I could live in a different world," Harry said, looking around the Great Hall.

“What do you want me to tell you, son?” Robert asked. “That this is the way your life was supposed to be? It’s not. Sorry. You were meant to be in the center of this mess, not to the side. But you refused to see that, you made a wish because you were just being dramatic. So here’s a history that isn’t right, the one you thought would be better for your friends, and here’s a way for you to learn it isn’t better for anyone. You don’t like my methods, learn how to do this yourself or suck it up and accept the fact that you are right for your destiny and your friends want you to lead them. Otherwise, you’re really just wasting both our time.”

“It’s not my fault we’re here,” Harry said angrily. “I wasn’t the one that brought me here.”

“Yes you were. I was just the road you turned down,” Robert said.

Harry shook his head and in that frozen moment, Harry looked over the faces of his classmates without shame. He could see all of them gossiping and eating and preparing for the day. He could imagine each and every one of them burdened with the impossible responsibility of having to either kill or be killed by the most evil man in the world. He could imagine them being sent home with bodyguards that could never really protect them and living in a world of fame while not knowing the dangers they would have to face.

“I was born into this profession, Harry, and I keep thinking my greatest wish is to be replaced,” Robert said slowly, “but it keeps not coming true, so I began to wonder why, and I think it’s because I wouldn’t trust anyone else to handle wishes correctly. I don’t think I’m perfect, but I’m certainly better than some of the other blockheads out there.”

Harry walked toward Hermione and Ron, and standing between them he turned to Robert.

“Standing around watching three other people go into the Chamber nearly killed me. I wanted to lead the hunt for Pettigrew but in this world everyone said I was too young. And when I saw my parents, I

knew they deserved to have their sacrifice honored, not thrown away,” Harry said. “That’s why it has to be me.”

Robert looked at him. “I still can’t undo this wish.”

Harry considered the man before him. “I hate this version of me. I hate the way he acted, the way he treated people. I even hate that he was on the National Junior Quidditch Team as a chaser. Even if I were to choose a world, I would never choose to become this version of me.”

“Then at least you’ve learned something,” Robert said, “though not the important thing, the one you would trust with the knowledge of your world.”

“Christine said I would have to trust this version of the person,” Harry said.

“She always was rather clever, that girl,” Robert said, looking almost wistful. “She was one of those selfless wishers that don’t make me hate myself.”

Harry nodded. That sounded like Christine.

“Can’t you give me a hint?” Harry asked. “About my secret keeper?”

Robert looked down at him. “I already have. I hope you clued in because I can only come back to ask you one more time and if you have no answer, I am bound by your original answer to pick anyone, anyone but you.”

The world started again the moment Robert disappeared, leaving Harry standing a good ways off from where he’d been when time stopped. A couple of people screamed, thinking he’d Apparated. Hermione finished standing and looked around for him. Soon people had flocked to him, begging him to tell them how he’d managed to get around the wards and Apparate in the building.

Chapter 15

Trouble Keeps Raining Down

Harry skipped classes all day, which made it easier to avoid the irritating questions that everyone insisted on asking him. It also reduced the number of admiring looks he received. He wasn't sure which behavior bothered him more. Unfortunately, he couldn't skip his detention with Remus Lupin. So at seven that night Harry found himself walking into the old Defense teacher's office, which looked exactly as Harry remembered from his third year, loaded with strange whirring, floating gizmos. It felt terribly awkward.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," Remus said, rising from where he sat behind his desk. The address – Mr. Potter – was like a slap to the face. Or at least a cold glass of water to the face.

"Hello, Professor," Harry said automatically, wondering for the first time if Remus felt as upset by the distant title of 'professor' as Harry did by Dumbledore and Lupin calling him Mr. Potter. Remus had certainly tried to force his former students to call him by his first name, but no one had really been comfortable with that.

"Please sit." The professor motioned to the chair across from him and Harry made his way over, glancing questioningly at Remus only briefly as he bent into the seat. "I must admit that this is rather uncomfortable for me."

"Yeah," Harry said, remembering the way that Remus had talked to him only a few short weeks before as if he were a horrible, malicious brat.

"Professor Dumbledore explained some things to me," Remus said.

Harry looked up, trying not to think too much about his conversation with Robert and instead focusing on the present by repeating, "Some things?"

"A lot of things," Remus amended in a warning tone. But he caught himself and softened his features, making Harry suspect that he was

reminding himself not to treat the Harry in front of him as the same student who had campaigned to have him fired in years past.

“Did he mention that I’m from a different world?” Harry asked, deciding to be blunt. His conversation with Robert had really drained him.

Remus nodded. “That was a rather large portion of our conversation.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“I don’t know what to say to you, really,” Remus said honestly, scratching his cheek absentmindedly. “Except to say that I’m having difficulty believing this. I’d have more doubt, but then I remember the way you came to me to learn Defense and the way you looked so surprised during our conversation. But mostly, it’s the way you look tired but comfortable in front of me right now that’s making this idea increasingly plausible in my mind.”

It was like with Christine again, the way she’d said he sat differently than her Harry.

“Is this a prank?” Remus asked, sounding resigned and maybe a bit hopeful.

“Yeah,” Harry said sarcastically, shooting Remus a withering look. “I got myself suspended, hexed another student, and chased down Pettigrew for a prank. Oh, and the whole freezing of the Great Hall thing. That was the best part.”

“Freezing the Great Hall?” Remus repeated.

“Never mind.” Harry waved a dismissive hand at him, tired of talking and thinking about this world. Tired of seeing looks like the one Remus was giving him now, the look that screamed mistrust and a guarded sort of belief, the look that told Harry that this Remus was a stranger.

“Who taught you your Patronus?” Remus asked, surprising Harry with the turn in conversation. It took him a moment to remember that he

had shown Remus his Patronus in an effort to make Remus work with him on Defense. It felt like it had been a decade before instead of a little over a week.

“You.”

Remus opened and shut his mouth a couple of times before sighing and saying, “It’s a stag.”

To Harry it sounded like a question, as if he were testing Harry’s knowledge. “You told me it was Prongs.”

Remus nodded shortly. “I wondered if you knew that.” It never occurred to Harry that this might be a terribly difficult conversation for Remus, talking about his dead best friend with a boy who had hated him since they’d met.

“Even if I didn’t, I would have learned it from the story of Sirius’s capture,” Harry said bitterly.

Remus hesitated. “You—when you were leaving with Christine—you mentioned Sirius.”

Harry nodded, that twist in his heart still present though now a duller ache. “I knew him.”

Sensing that it was a touchy topic, though he thought it was for reasons regarding the Kiss in this world, Remus said, “And since I taught you the Patronus, I assume you knew me.”

Harry nodded again. “You were my professor for a year.”

“Just a year?”

“Snape”—he ignored Lupin’s correction of ‘professor—“let it slip about you being a werewolf, and you resigned.”

There was a strange spinning metal hoop in the corner of the room that reminded Harry of the diagrams of outer space he had seen in

primary school. It felt like a different lifetime. Technically, it was a different lifetime.

“You were the best Defense teacher we ever had,” Harry said suddenly, looking up and into his professor’s eyes, which looked a bit distant right then.

“I can’t imagine the Harry I know saying something like that, even for a prank,” Remus said, which made Harry grimace. People kept trying to convince him that he’d been likable in this world, but as far as Harry could tell, he had been little more than a jackass.

“You ever feel like hexing him?” Harry asked, only partially joking.

Remus shook his head. “I would never hurt a student.”

“Never admit motive,” Harry said, quoting Sirius from the past summer.

“Rule four,” Remus said, smiling slightly. “Did you read that in your dad’s journal?”

“No,” Harry said. “I haven’t seen that journal yet. I probably hid it.”

Remus looked like he was trying to remind himself that this was a different person. “Right.”

Harry explained, “Sirius used to quote the Marauder Rules a lot.” For the first time since coming to this world, Harry noticed something completely recognizable pass over Remus’s face: pure, unadulterated grief.

“I hate that I gave him over to the Dementors, and I hate that I apparently blamed you for not helping them catch him,” Harry said quickly, before he could think to not say it. “You should have hated me too.”

“You—this version of you—apologized to me about your outburst,” Remus said. That surprised Harry a great deal, and it must have shown on his face because Remus explained, “You came to my office

and told me that you had been out of line, that you would never respect me for my choice, but that you shouldn't have yelled in front of everyone."

"I don't understand this me at all," Harry said.

"He thought I had aided his parents' murderer by keeping his transformation a secret. It was understandable that he was so angry, no matter how I felt about it."

Harry shook his head and sarcastically muttered, "Right."

A bit of wind swept through the room and Harry noticed that the window was open as Remus asked, "In your world, what was different?"

"Everything," Harry said easily.

"The Headmaster was under the impression that you might have been the Boy-Who-Lived," Remus said.

Harry shrugged. Dumbledore always seemed to know everything and Remus trusted him; there was no point lying. "I was."

"Do you know how you did it? How you beat Voldemort?" Remus asked, focusing on Harry with all of his attention. "Neville hasn't a clue what he did in this world, and Dumbledore only has guesses."

"I didn't beat him. He disappeared for a decade and came back," Harry said.

"He came back?" Remus looked worried.

Harry nodded. "Yes, like he's doing in this world, though here everyone's lying to themselves to think they're safe."

"But how, when you were a baby, did you make him disappear for a decade?" Remus asked, obviously still thinking about Harry's claim that Voldemort was returning, but needing this information much, much more.

“My Dumbledore mentioned my mother’s sacrifice.”

“Lily?” Remus asked, surprised. “But Alice wasn’t anywhere near Neville. Nor was Frank.”

Harry thought briefly of admitting that Neville survived here solely because of Robert the Genie, but didn’t want to get into that explanation. “That’s all I really know, it was my mum that stopped him.”

“It had nothing to do with you?” Remus pressed. “Your powers?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m just a normal student. Average. Hermione’s the smartest one in our year, that hasn’t changed between worlds.”

“Then how—” Remus had stopped himself and was obviously trying to find a way to talk about something that he felt uncomfortable mentioning.

“How do I have a power that the Dark Lord knows not?” Harry asked a bit bitterly.

Remus looked very much like he wanted to stand and pace. “You know of the Prophecy?”

“I’m surprised that you know it,” Harry muttered.

“Well, if you do, then you understand why I would have thought”—Remus took a breath and changed tracks. “Dumbledore at your age could melt entire walls with spells that he had basically created. He could make people pass out and think it’d been a week when it had been a moment, or a moment when it was a week. He could summon one-hundred-year-old chairs and transfigure curtains into mountain trolls with painted nails.”

“And Tom Riddle could too,” Harry said, knowing where the conversation was going and feeling frustrated and a bit scared, though he was also resolved. “But I’m just an average wizard with a

scar on my forehead and a big fat destiny that I apparently don't really want to shove off on anyone."

"Not even a scar here," Remus said, waving a hand toward Harry, who unconsciously reached up to feel the familiar mark on his face. It wasn't there.

"No," Harry said, lowering his hand, "now I'm just normal."

"And you seem to want to be that way," Remus said, sounding desperately lost. "You avoid reporters and play seeker and sit at breakfast quietly. For the first time since I met you, you walked into the Great Hall on September 1st not telling a story."

"And why is that?" Harry heard himself ask.

"Why were you not telling a story?" Remus asked, looking confused.

"No." Feeling as if he ought to just ask, Harry finished his thought. "Why was the year you started teaching here the first time I met you?"

Looking surprised, Remus said, "It wasn't."

"What?"

"I visited you a few times when you were growing up."

"But I thought—everything everyone's told me says that you and I don't get along."

"Our relationship's been strained since the start of my teaching tenure," Remus acknowledged.

"Probably because I'm a stupid git here."

"You're not a stupid git," Remus said, sounding amused.

"Yes," Harry said, nodding, "I am. When I met you in my world, you really were great to me, as a teacher and stuff. I can't imagine here being different."

“Does that mean—does you not knowing me mean that neither of your parents was able to raise you?”

Harry shook his head and saw the metal spinning thing fall a couple of feet closer to the ground. “No, they weren’t.”

“And the McGraths didn’t...”

“My aunt took me in.” Harry didn’t want to talk about this topic either.

That made Remus rather curious. “Lily’s sister? I didn’t think she’d”—he seemed to be struggling to find a way to voice his thoughts and finally settled on saying, “I suppose it’s natural for you to live with family.”

Harry shrugged briefly. “It protected me.”

“Even if it didn’t,” Remus said, “it’s a place where you can connect with your family.”

Harry made a noncommittal noise and looked out the window as he asked, “Do you visit them very often? My parents?”

Remus’s face tightened. “Not as often as I ought to. They were good friends, even if they did think I was the betrayer at the end.”

“They don’t recognize me,” Harry said, trying not to sound as hurt and confused as he was, but failing rather spectacularly. He didn’t know quite why he mentioned this to Remus, except that he was the one person Harry expected understood what he was going through. “Mum would flash in and out of understanding.”

Remus put his hands on his desk, fingers spread wide. “Sometimes they recognize me and think I’ve taken an aging potion to disguise myself. Other times they try to attack me, thinking I’m a Death Eater. James laughs like when we were young, though, and your mother hugs me tightly and asks if I’d like to see you.”

“Do you think they’d be mad at me for coming to this world to avoid being the one in the prophecy?” Harry asked without thinking. He’d found he could talk a lot more if he thought about this conversation as one that existed solely in his head, one that wasn’t real.

Remus shook his head. “Never. They would be supportive, though James might not have understood your choice.”

Harry waited.

Remus took a breath. “And Lily loved you as you were. No matter what. Crying or giggling, spitting up on her or throwing a temper tantrum about a toy, she never lost patience. She never yelled. And when we were in school, the thing she hated most in the world was standing out for reasons she did not think she deserved. She hated the idea of being Head Girl and being known for having survived a Death Eater attack when she just thought she had been very lucky. So no, I don’t think your mother would be mad. I think she’d have understood your choice more than anyone.”

Hermione had once noted that Remus barely spoke about James and always at length about Harry’s mother. Harry’s friend had told him that she thought that was because Remus felt overwhelmed by the task of trying to remember his best friend James, let alone summing him up as a person. However, talking about Lily Evans, whom he only knew as James’ girlfriend, was probably less painful. Harry remembered thinking that Hermione over-thought things a lot.

Obviously still thinking of Harry’s parents, Remus said, “It’s hard seeing them in St. Mungo’s.”

“Christine said that was because they were too big for a single room,” Harry remembered.

“They were certainly a force of nature.” Remus’ hands fisted briefly. “And the worst part is knowing that they are there because they trusted someone that we all believed was a friend.”

Anger filled Harry for a moment as he thought about Wormtail, the man who’d cut his arm two years before to raise the Dark Lord.

“Pettigrew,” Harry began tersely, “said he did it for gold and glory, did it because he was desperate to survive.”

“He did it because he was weak, because I wasn’t there to talk to him, because he was jealous of James. He did it because he wanted power and was misguided enough to believe Voldemort would give it to him. Since learning of his betrayal, I’ve thought of a hundred thousand reasons why he could have done it, my old best friend, and none of them are adequate.”

Harry shook his head and watched the floating metal rise up inch by inch. He felt strangely brave in this world, knowing he wouldn’t stay here, knowing Remus wouldn’t remember this conversation. “When you and Sirius confronted him in my world, Sirius told Pettigrew that you and he would have died rather than betray him.”

“I talked to Sirius in your world?” Remus asked, surprising Harry by holding the edge of his desk with both hands even as he tried to look calm. “I know he’s innocent?”

“Yes.” Harry remembered that night like it was yesterday. “You gathered the old crowd together and lived in Grimmauld Place.”

Remus looked like he was torn between desperately wanting to believe that this was true and wanting it to be a lie. “He vowed not to ever go back there, even if it were his only way of living.”

“He left every chance he had,” Harry said, feeling sick, but knowing that Lupin was the only one that could understand this story and remembering that this world wasn’t real helped. “And two years after he escaped Azkaban, he was dead because he left the house.”

“He had two years?”

Harry blinked. “Yes.”

“Then your world is far more generous than ours,” Remus said, hands now in his lap. They sat for a few moments in silence, each thinking about the other’s words until Remus broke the silence.

“Your mother would have forgiven Peter.”

Harry felt like Lupin had spit on his mother’s grave. “What?”

“She could never remain angry for very long, it was what made her so incapable of understanding Voldemort. The fact that he killed without motive baffled her. She always said that we didn’t have the full story, that there must be a reason, that no one could live like that.” The desk felt like it was shrinking, bringing Harry uncomfortably close to his professor. “She would have thought Peter had a reason, a motive, something that we didn’t know but could understand if given the chance. She would have pitied him for being stuck in such a horrible life.”

Harry clenched his teeth. “I hate him.”

“As do I, Mr. Potter. As will I always.”

Though it was technically a detention, Harry was never asked to clean a trophy room or organize potion ingredients. He did not have to go through the Forbidden Forrest with Hagrid or help Professor McGonagall with her porcupines. Instead, in one of the most painful nights of his life, Harry learned how little he knew about a man who might have been an uncle to him, had his wish been but a little different.

Harry wanted so much to go home.

Harry walked into the Great Hall the next morning and slumped onto the bench even as he reached out for a banana to peel. He was tired mentally and physically, having gone over his conversation with Robert a thousand times in his head and his lists the rest of the night and still having no idea who the secret keeper was. He wanted to rip Robert limb from limb. Which, of course, really meant that he wanted to rip himself limb from limb for making such a stupid wish.

Naomi was already sitting at the Gryffindor table, as she had always done since he had arrived in this world, but that day she looked at him with her soft brown eyes and soft beautiful face, and said, "You don't look well."

"I don't feel well," Harry conceded, putting down the banana.

Naomi put down her spoon. "Oh."

"Actually, if you want to know, I've just suffered the worst disappointment of my life," Harry continued, surprising himself with the amount of honesty he was willing to share with a practical stranger.

She tilted her head and looked carefully at him. "What happened?"

"I thought I had the answer to a key." Harry poked a bowl of grapes irritably. "I didn't."

"How important was it, your key?" Naomi asked.

Harry opened his mouth to say it was the most important thing in the world, but the words caught in his throat as he looked at Naomi Ryan, who had ridden on that tour bus with him and taken care of Alana. He saw her soft features and determined eyes and the friend that he had never expected and he felt a sharp pang of regret that he hadn't known her in his natural life.

He wondered if she was very different in his world, as Hermione and Ginny were so different. As he himself was different.

"It was just something personal," Harry said, trying to glare a hole through the food on his table.

Just at that moment, Harry felt something small and wet land on his nose. He looked left and right to see where it could have come from and noticed two younger boys standing in the doorway looking excited. Actually, they looked a bit like the twins during the Firework Show. Harry felt a few more drops land on him and looked up to notice that the rain, which normally disappeared many meters above

the tables, was now solid all the way to the ground and it was beginning to rain in earnest. Harry was soaked in moments but couldn't be bothered to move. He was too grumpy.

"Of course," Harry muttered.

Naomi sat in the rain looking up at the sky in the ceiling and shook her head. "You have no idea, do you? What you've put me through."

"What?" The rain was loud and students all around them were scrambling to leave, most of the girls shrieking. One tried to cover her hair with a bowl without realizing it was full of food. The older years cast spells to block the rain as they left. Naomi and Harry just sat, he because he had a suspicion growing in his stomach that froze him in place, she because she was so tired of skirting the issue and was rather desperate to talk at last.

"I don't understand," he said when it seemed she wouldn't say anything.

"No, you don't, do you?" Naomi asked, squinting at Harry through the rain. Her face was wet. Her clothes were wet. She was beautiful.

"Naomi," Harry said, putting his hand on a puddle on the table where the water from a goblet was overflowing, "are you my secret keeper?"

She blinked her large brown eyes at him. There were raindrops on her eyelashes. "I don't know why it's me. I don't know why you would pick me to remember a world where we've never spoken."

As much as he trusted Hermione and as much as he knew he could talk to Ginny, Harry did not want to talk to either of them. Hermione wasn't the same person he knew and trusted. Ginny Weasley expected him to be someone he wasn't. And so Harry found himself sitting down and sharing everything with a person he only knew as a quiet, easy listener, one who expected nothing of him: Naomi Ryan.

Harry put his head in his hands and wanted to groan. She'd been right in front of him the whole time, from day one in Italy to every

morning at breakfast, and he hadn't even noticed. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Robert told me to pretend like I didn't know anything unless you asked me directly," she said, skin slick with water in the still-pouring rain.

That was so stupid. "And you just trusted him?"

Naomi looked torn, sad, and frustrated all at once. "Do you even know who he is, Harry?"

Harry shrugged a bit angrily. "A guy that can stop time? A man immune to magic? Christine said he was a genie."

"He is the first genie."

There were too many questions running through Harry's head that he needed to sort out. "He said he was twenty-six."

"Twenty-six hundred years old," Naomi said in a rushed whisper over the pattering of raindrops. "He helped Pompey conquer Mithridates, and Napoleon earn the love of his armies."

"And he stranded me in a world where I knew no one," Harry snapped, angry at the situation, angry at her for not coming to him earlier, angry at himself for not realizing that the quiet, sincere Naomi would be so easy to trust. She would never have changed anything without talking to him, never have created a problem. "You could have told me."

"I thought this was where you wanted to be."

"Why would you—"

"I confronted you about it," Naomi said. "I brought you those photos. I said you were acting differently. Why do you think I did that?"

"I don't know."

"I wanted you to reassure me about the fact that I wasn't going crazy!" she exclaimed. "I remembered an entirely different history, Harry, and I wanted to know I wasn't the only one, but you didn't say anything so I thought you wanted to live here."

"I asked you if you remembered at the beginning of the year!" Harry screamed over the wind.

"And I didn't trust you then!" Naomi yelled back, sounding rather hysterical. "I had a head full of two sets of memories merging the day I went to Italy with your family. I spent the entire time watching you, seeing that you were different, but I didn't know how. You think I was eager to share all this?"

"Why wouldn't you be?"

"Because what if I was wrong? What if I was just mad? What then? I'm locked up and ignored for the rest of my life because I opened up to a boy who, in all of my memories of the world I was in, did nothing by scorn, berate, and hate me."

She had some valid points, but still. "I brought it up."

"Begrudgingly." Naomi ran a hand through her hair. "Besides, I knew you'd fix it soon enough if you wanted to, just like you always do."

He looked sharply at her. "What does that mean?"

"Every year, you, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger manage to find yourselves in horrible situations and come out victorious. I've seen you together covered in grime, turned to stone, and broken. I've seen you handle the Chamber of Secrets twice now. I knew if I just backed off long enough it wouldn't be a problem."

"Then why are you telling me this now?"

Naomi put a hand on the edge of the table. "Because—Because I'm tired, Harry, and I just want to talk to someone that doesn't expect me to hate you."

Harry had nothing to say to that. Nothing to say to anyone anymore. He was tired of talking. Tired of this world. So he just sat in the rain with puddles growing around him, and beside him sat a beautiful girl who he apparently trusted with his past and future not saying a word. They were soaked together.

Chapter 16

He Flew

Sitting quietly stunned in the rain, Harry tried to understand how the girl in front of him could possibly be his secret keeper. And how he could have been so stupid as to overlook her. His wish world was spinning out of control and it was all he could do to put both his hands on the table and take a couple deep breaths as he tried to figure out what in the hell he was supposed to say to her now. He was saved the trouble of speaking when McGonagall swooped in and ushered them angrily to the Hospital Wing.

Neither Naomi nor Harry was able to explain to the indignant Madam Pomfrey exactly why they had decided to sit in the freezing rain for such a long time. The nurse kept saying things like, "It's almost winter," and, "What were they thinking?" and Naomi and Harry pretended like they hadn't heard her. Actually, Harry almost hadn't heard the nurse over the pounding in his ears, and if Naomi's shaking hands were any indication, she wasn't exactly at her most perceptive either.

"You're done, Mr. Potter." It wasn't until after he heard his name that he realized he was being spoken to, but the stern nurse gave him such a look of condescension that it was hard for Harry not to want to look at the ground in shame. It felt like he'd been in and out of the Hospital Wing more times than the Gryffindor common room since coming to Hogwarts, but somehow, Pomfrey still managed to scare him.

If Harry had been the type to skip class when he was upset, he would definitely have missed Ancient Runes (his first class of the day). As it was, Harry mechanically went and scratched out useless doodles on his parchment, not understanding a word of the lecture, but briefly acknowledging that Hermione was transcribing away and not even once glancing in his direction. That would get old fast, he was sure.

But then, why would it matter if she was or wasn't talking to him in this world? He had found his secret keeper, hadn't he? He was going home, wasn't he?

So why was he in class at all?

When class ended, Harry packed up his things. This would be a long day.

"Rumor has it you were hit by that prank this morning," said a Ravenclaw that Harry may or may not have spoken to recently. His name was something common like Jim or Dan.

"I was," Harry replied automatically.

"I hear it was with Naomi Ryan." The bloke's tone had turned suggestive. Harry remained quiet, not wanting to prolong the conversation. "I bet she looked good all wet." Well, really, she had, but Harry wasn't about to admit that to this imbecile. "Just don't tell Moran I said so, mate."

Then the bloke was gone, squeezing his way through the door and into the crowded corridor. Hermione followed a moment later. Now that he expected to go back to his world, he felt surprisingly little besides a dull pain about Hermione ignoring him.

Harry hefted his bag onto his shoulder and left the room as well. He went to the rest of his scheduled classes without thinking, the routine making him feel somewhat normal even though the schedule included classes he would never normally take, rather ruining the effect of pretending that he wasn't stuck in a different universe.

At dinner that night, Harry was pushing the food around his plate, occasionally glancing at Hermione reading a book or Ron seemingly trying to feed Parvati in order to get her to pay solid attention to him. The second sight made him want to laugh; he found himself smiling at his plate as the image repeated in his mind.

With a thud, Duncan Moran sat next to Harry and asked, "What are you playing at, mate?"

It took Harry a moment to adjust to the abrupt start of the conversation and thus, rather stupidly, replied, "What?"

"I heard about you and Naomi and breakfast," he said, as if that explained his entire almost-hostile demeanor. This was a bloke Harry only spoke to infrequently.

"Yeah?" Harry asked, waiting for further explanation.

Moran actually seemed a bit more relaxed the more openly confused Harry seemed, as if that proved that Harry wasn't hiding any shady dealings. "I know your families are friends and everything, but I thought you hated each other."

Feeling particularly unwilling to discuss his relationship with Naomi Ryan in front of the dinner crowd at the Gryffindor table (which had suddenly quieted quite a bit), Harry jabbed his fork against the wood table. "It's none of your business."

Moran waved his hands in front of him as if to ward off a bug. "Hey, Harry, I'm not saying it's bad to hate her." He leaned in and said, a bit jokingly, "But just remember that even if your girlfriend ran off with your year mate, you can't go thinking you have a right to take someone else's."

By then the entire table was openly listening to and staring at the exchange. Some looked expectantly at Harry. Others were actually shaking their heads ruefully. Ginny Weasley left the table looking rather bothered. Still, none looked like they expected the conversation to dissolve into an argument, but Harry didn't exactly take note of that as he bristled and rather strongly replied, "I'm not stealing your girlfriend."

Moran's smile froze at Harry's hostile tone. It took him a minute to nod and pat Harry's shoulder rather awkwardly. "Just had to check is all."

Conversations broke out around them as Moran stood to leave. Deciding he wasn't hungry and feeling like a traffic accident that people wanted to rubberneck, Harry made to leave too. But Andy

McGrath sat down and began to talk to him before he had that chance.

“What was that all about?” Andy asked, looking confusedly at Moran’s retreating back.

“Nothing,” Harry said shortly. “It was none of his business.”

“But all you had to say was that you hate Naomi and everything would have been fine with Moran,” Andy said, sounding as if he were questioning Harry’s sanity. “Everyone already knows you and Naomi hate each other. You wouldn’t have hurt her.”

“I don’t hate her,” Harry said, thinking of his counter-part and wondering how he could hate someone like Naomi, who was nothing but quiet, patient, and polite.

“Well that’s new,” Andy said, reaching across the table and sliding Harry’s plate toward him so he could pick off the things he wanted. “When did you start not hating her?”

“I don’t know, this summer?” Harry tapped his fork against the table and thought of the first time he’d met her after she and her sisters had gone down to visit the villa.

Andy stopped chewing and looked up. “Before or after you stopped writing Parvati?”

“About the same time.” Which was perfectly true, but unfortunately for Harry, he didn’t understand the conclusions Andy would draw from that sentiment until well after he spoke the incriminating sentence.

“Is that why you stopped writing Parvati?” Andy asked rather boldly.

“No,” Harry said, surprised that Andy would think so. “That’s just the way that it happened.”

Andy shook his head and grinned at Harry. “Right. Of course. One has nothing to do with the other.”

Growing irritated with the conversation, Harry scanned the rest of the table. The other students were chatting, quite a few of them glancing at him. A few openly pointed. Ignoring that and deciding that Andy needed to be distracted, Harry asked, "Where's your brother?"

Andy grinned at him like he'd said something terribly funny. "You mean Stevie? Our brother?"

Harry probably should have guessed that the entire family considered him a legitimate McGrath. "Yeah."

Andy shrugged. "Probably beating himself up about the Quidditch match we lost."

"We lost?" Harry hadn't even known that a match was happening.

Andy nodded. "Ginny caught the snitch and all, but one of Hufflepuff's chasers scored right then and tipped the scales. Stevie thinks he should have been able to hit a bludger at him, but we all know that it's just that we really need a better Keeper."

That didn't make much sense. "What about Ron?"

"What about Ron?" Andy asked, grabbing a bit of pie to add to his plate.

"Why isn't he our Keeper?"

"Because that stupid ponce over there won the position," Andy said, jabbing his fork in the direction of a seventh year who was loudly taking about his latest mark on his Defense exam.

"Harry?" asked a voice behind him that Harry instantly recognized: Professor Lupin.

Twisting around on the bench, Harry stood and said, "Yes?"

"For your detention tonight, meet me in the trophy room." The werewolf turned and left, giving Harry the chance to go back to eating.

"How many did you end up with again?" Andy asked.

"Detentions?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know. A lot. A month or something."

"Ouch," Andy said, standing. "Especially with Lupin and you the way you are. But it's better than Snape. Lupin'd never have you do something half as bad as Snape."

Harry made a non-committal sound, tired of pretending like this world mattered anymore, tired of this version of himself and the strained relationship with people he cared about. He would be leaving soon anyway, right? Why bother? Standing, Harry turned on his heel and left. He didn't even notice Naomi Ryan entering at that moment.

The detention proved to be very different than the one the night before. They talked for a while about the spells that Harry knew and the dark creatures that he'd faced. Remus had smiled a bit hearing about Lockhart, who actually had taught in this world in the '92-'93 term. Hearing that the Unforgivables had been used in the classroom caused his eyebrows to lift, though he nodded understandingly when he heard that it was Moody. Harry decided not to mention the fact that Moody had really been Death Eater Barty Crouch Jr. using Polyjuice since it would require too much explanation. And while the Defense professor was understandably impressed with learning about the Triwizard Tournament (the Hungarian Horntail and the Summoning charm for the Firebolt especially), the part that really interested Lupin was learning about the D.A. and what all they'd worked on.

So Harry told him about the Educational Decrees and Dolores Umbridge and the various bans on Defense teaching. Remus had not been amused. Harry explained about Hermione's informal first meeting and the way that Harry had run the meetings that Hermione organized.

"It was easily the best thing about last year," Harry said. "I was always planning lessons when I was in detention or supposed to be writing essays."

"Detention?" Remus asked, looking torn between curious and exasperated. Harry nodded, but didn't say anything about that. "Did you often get in trouble?"

"I lost my house fifty points in one go my first year," Harry said. "Hagrid won a pet dragon, and Ron and I snuck out at night to give it to his brother who's a dragon trainer."

Remus smiled. "You don't sound so different from our Harry right then, breaking rules to protect your friends like Hagrid."

It had been a long time ago—nearly five years—but Harry still remembered the dread of seeing McGonagall and Malfoy and only just realizing he'd forgotten his father's cloak.

Harry said, "Dumbledore's Army wasn't technically allowed to exist either, and we all could have been suspended or expelled for participating, but Hermione kept scheduling the meetings and people kept coming, so the club stayed."

"Did you try to teach them the Patronus Charm?"

"Yeah. And a few of them managed it by the end of the year. Hermione's was an otter." Harry went on to explain Ron's, and Ginny's mist, and Susan Bone's when Lupin interrupted.

"Was Luna Lovegood one of the members?" the professor asked.

"Yes, actually." Harry tried to remember whether or not he'd mentioned her. He didn't think he had. "How did you know that?"

"You're rather close to the members of your group, and you're certainly more comfortable around them than this version of you was."

"I don't know about that."

"I do. You switched Potions partners to Susan Bones this term. You've been close with Hermione Granger. Luna Lovegood and you entered the Great Hall together this term, and she mentioned you're ability to see the horses that drag the carriages to school. All people you've mentioned were in your D.A."

"Well," Harry said, for lack of anything better.

"So, Harry, I'm curious," Lupin said, tapping his fingers on his desk. "You've told me that you train on your own, that you know many spells that are beyond your year, but why did you want to take Defense with me this term?"

Harry shrugged. "It's the only class I know I won't fail."

"That's quite a humble response."

"More like honest," Harry muttered.

"Then--" Remus paused. "Yesterday we talked about Voldemort's power. Do you want to train for combat?"

"No." Harry actually grimaced. "Like I said, I'm not exceptional. Or even all that clever. Just lucky. I don't think I'll ever be as strong as I need to be."

"Then—well, that's a rather defeatist attitude."

"I'm not saying I want to lose or anything," Harry said defensively. "It's just—well—luck's the only thing that's really worked for me so far, and the 'power he knows not' isn't anything really spectacular, it's just... love." The professor was looking at him rather seriously, as if he wanted to say something to Harry, so the boy preempted him by saying, "Besides, if I really need to know something, Hermione or Ron will work it out. They're brilliant."

Remus's face relaxed with the words, and he smiled a small smile. "Well, if you're sure, maybe you could just show me some of the spells you've practiced."

"You mean in a duel?" Harry hadn't been in a duel since second year, and that had been a disaster that ended in the entire school thinking he was evil because he spoke to snakes and his best friends thinking he was nuts for hearing voices in the walls.

"Yes, I do," Remus said.

"Like I said—"

"I know, I know, you're slower than a rock and know less than a void," Remus said dismissively, standing and moving all of the furniture and decorations in the room into a small adjacent closet. The room was actually rather big without all of that clutter. The professor moved to stand before Harry and bow as was traditional, but that made Harry think of the graveyard in Little Hangleton and Voldemort wordlessly forcing him to obey that convention as the Death Eaters chuckled.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry cried.

Remus ducked out of the way faster than one might think possible if they judged by his grey hair. "That wasn't exactly proper, Harry. Fermentia."

"Protego." Instantly, the shield went up and blocked the Foot Binding Hex. "The last time I bowed in a duel, Voldemort forced me to do so. I don't plan on doing it again. Hirsutus!"

Remus looked like he'd rather like to ask about that comment but he was too busy dodging and ducking and shooting back his own spells to do so. The duel was fun for the professor, but Harry felt rather oddly about the whole thing. He liked the challenge, liked that it reminded him of the D.A. and all that they'd done. He liked that this felt natural and easy to him, but at the same time, he hated throwing hexes at Remus. It felt odd to fight in a duel and not fear for his life. It made him feel less sharp.

He never quite realized what an odd sixteen-year-old boy he really was.

But as the duel dragged on, Harry forced himself to forget that this was just for fun and instead work with his instincts.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” Harry cried after ducking a Burning Hex. The Levitation Charm ripped a brick from the wall and sent it careening at Remus’s head. The professor was surprised by the attack and then was off balance after diving out of the way of the flying brick. Harry hit him with a powerful Cheering Charm, but Remus managed to send a Cutting Curse at Harry, who dodged it. Curses, he’d come to realize, were always brighter (and often slower) than other spells. Surprised by the professor’s powerful hex attack, Harry impulsively Summoned the closet door off its hinges. It missed Lupin, who spun to avoid it, but Harry redirected it before it hit him, Banishing it right back at the professor. It pinned Lupin firmly against the wall long enough for Harry to run up and snatch his wand right out of his sweaty hand, ending the duel.

After the door fell away from him, Lupin gingerly stretched out and pushed off the wall, muttering, “Ouch.”

“Sorry,” Harry said, handing him back his wand and taking a look around the room. The door was splintered; stuff was spilling out of the now-open closet; and a large chunk of the outer wall was crumbling. “And, er, sorry about your office.”

Remus shook his head, surveying the damage even as he put his door back into its place. “No need to apologize. I think I may have underestimated you.”

“Me?” Harry asked, grinning. “What about you? I never expected the Cutting Curse.”

Remus looked chagrined. “I only responded to your attacks, I decided that you need a bit more of a challenge.”

“Not much more,” Harry said, watching the brick fly back into its place and mortar reset itself. The castle took rather fastidious care of itself.

“Expelliarmus, Accio, the Cheering and Banishing Charms,” Remus said, reciting some of Harry’s choices. “Why did you use those spells?”

Harry shrugged. “They just came to mind.”

“Many traditional duelers would have hated you for that strategy.”

“And I’d tell them to go stuff it,” Harry said, remembering Zacharias Smith. “A boy said that Expelliarmus wasn’t worth his time the first day of the D.A.”

Remus, who was cleaning up the mark on the wall where his curse had hit, glanced at Harry over his shoulder. “And what did you tell him?”

“That it had saved my life several times, so he should stop complaining or leave.”

Remus turned around and Summoned all of his furniture back, grinning. “Bet he took that well.”

“He learned the spell,” Harry said, taking a step back to make room for the desk that was bumping into his hip repeatedly as if to budge him out of the way of its path.

Remus grinned as he nodded, but while pulling his chair out of the way of the coat rack, he lost his humor, shaking his head as if bothered by something. Harry would have asked about it, but he didn’t have to since Remus pivoted, hands still clutching the back of his chair, and said, “You mention Voldemort and fights to the death rather casually.”

“Not exactly casually.” Harry twirled his wand in his fingers. “But Hagrid once told me to take things one day at a time. I’ve just been trying to do that.”

The chair made a protesting noise when Remus sank onto it. "That's good advice."

"I always thought so," Harry said, following suit and settling into his chair.

Professor Lupin was looking oddly at him, but Harry was rather used to that happening in both worlds and was fully prepared to ignore him until the professor lost interest. Lupin shook his head and said, "Your parents used to duel like that."

Harry blinked. "What?"

Lupin's eyes locked on his. "Your parents—well, your father was powerful and your mother—your mother was just—skilled is really the only word for it. They—they ignored all convention, all standard rules, and fought with instinct. Like you just now."

Harry didn't know what to say. He had started the D.A. at Hermione's behest, but he had dedicated himself to an extent that bordered on obsession. If he had an unconventional style, it was because he was his own teacher.

"I'm lucky a lot."

"Yes," Remus said, "you certainly are."

It was moments like this that reminded Harry that he wasn't from this world, and even more that he wasn't very close to his professor.

"You were a good Defense student, weren't you?" Remus asked bluntly.

"What?" Harry asked. "Oh—er—Defense was my best subject, but Hermione would say that's not saying much."

"But it's so odd. Defense was the one class that neither of your parents liked. Your mother dropped it after O.W.L.s, claiming she'd received a Troll on the practical, and though James managed a N.E.W.T. in it, he never really cared for the subject." Well wasn't that

great? More proof that Harry and his parents had nothing in common but Quidditch, Gryffindor, green eyes, and crazy hair. "But I guess that just goes to show that blood doesn't determine everything about a person."

"If you ever thought blood mattered, I don't think you'd exactly be rooting for me to be stronger," Harry said.

The professor blinked. "No. I guess I wouldn't."

Harry walked around that whole week in a daze, mind tangled up with thoughts of Robert's frozen hall and Naomi admitting that she was his personal pair of Red Ruby Slippers. He tried to make sense of everything that had happened, everything he'd learned, but the more he thought about it, the more frustrated and tired he became. At least, though, sitting in Potions with Susan Bones, he could acknowledge that he did tend to gravitate toward D.A. members.

"Oh," Susan squeaked, surprising Harry into paying attention to the present.

Harry looked up from the laceweed he'd been about to rip apart and asked, "You all right?"

"Er, yes, fine," she said. "But maybe you shouldn't rip those. The potion needs the whole stalk."

"Oh," Harry said, glancing up at the directions and seeing that she was right. "Sorry, I'm really bad at this."

"No, you're not," Susan said, shaking her head and smiling pleasantly as she reached over the table to take the plant away from him. "You're just distracted, that's all."

Harry said nothing, just gathered up the ingredients for the next step. They were trying to make a potion to mend broken limb bones or something, and Harry was beginning to wonder if being an Auror was

worth all of this tedious work and having to deal with Snape on a daily basis. Harry bet it wasn't.

After class ended, Harry took his time preparing to leave, willing everyone to leave without him, especially Neville, who was no longer a braggart and no longer an arse, but was rather clingy and bitter towards everyone who believed he'd controlled the Basilisk. He didn't want to deal with all of this anymore. It felt like he was just wasting time here, growing close to people who wouldn't remember him if they existed at all in his world. Caught up in a whole new set of thoughts, Harry hefted his bag onto his shoulder, stuck his hands in his pocket and headed for the door with the hopes of avoiding all human contact.

Unfortunately, fate did not really feel like giving Harry Potter a day off, and he ran headlong into Professor Snape. All of the things that both were carrying fell to the ground. As opposed to McGonagall who magically collected all of the fallen items and moved on when Harry had bumped into her, Snape felt the need to start reprimanding Harry properly, for which the boy was certainly not in the mood.

"You clumsy, oaf of a boy! Is this yet another way to get people to pay attention to you? Run out of dead people to frame and fellow students to hex?"

"Yes, that's it! Without those options, running into professors seemed like such a solid plan!" Harry said angrily.

"I've heard your ridiculous story," Snape hissed, not even looking at the potions he had dropped. "Want a bit more of the limelight do you? Want to call more attention to you and your crazy parents?"

Patience as low as it was, Harry would have cursed the man, maybe he would have just hit him, but he was stopped by quiet, even steps and a soft but serious voice saying, "You can't speak to him like that."

Both men turned to face the speaker and found Naomi Ryan looking steadily at Professor Snape, school bag over her left shoulder, her hand holding the strap.

“Twenty points from Gryffindor for eavesdropping!” Snape snapped.

“You can take a thousand points if you like,” Naomi said rather mildly as she took another step forward, coming within a couple of steps of the pair, “but you can’t speak to Harry like that, and you most certainly can’t speak of his parents like that.”

“Just like your father, Potter, you need a woman to save you,” Snape said, sneering at the boy. “I wonder if you treat her as poorly as your father did your mother.”

“Oh shut up!” Harry yelled. “I know you called my mother a Mudblood when she tried to keep my father from hurting you. I know you probably rejoiced when she died!”

“When she died, Potter? You’ve really gone round the bend, following their example!”

“Don’t you dare—“ Harry said, grabbing for his wand, but Naomi stepped in and blocked him.

“You’re a professor. You shouldn’t speak to student like that, let alone a boy who--”

“Harassed and threatened to murder me?” Snape still looked so insufferable with his stupid black robes and evil black eyes.

“Who saved your life,” Naomi corrected. If the situation had been a bit different, Harry would have protested that particular information, but as things were, Snape cut him off.

“I never took you for such a fool, Ryan, but perhaps I should have known better after you idiotically got yourself Petrified.”

“She was attacked by a Basilisk that you probably set free!” Even in the middle of that exclamation, Harry knew that he was lying and couldn’t have cared less.

“Unlike you, I don’t send dangerous creatures to attack people,” Snape snapped.

It felt like he had punched Harry, reminding him of the Dementors his counterpart had sent at Sirius, and so Harry lashed out, yelling, "No, you're just a lousy Death Eater!"

"You don't know what you're talking about, boy! Detention for a month!"

"Please! Everyone knows you kiss the hems of Voldemort's robes! How noble--"

"You will not say the Dark Lord's name!" Snape barked, eye twitching at the sound, making Harry want to say it several thousand more times.

"I'll say whatever I damn well please—"

"Another week of detention, Potter! Two weeks!" Snape yelled, clenching and unclenching his hands as if keeping himself from cursing Harry. "And you too, Ryan!"

"No," Naomi said.

"What?" the professor asked, his voice dropping dangerously.

"I said 'no,' we won't be coming to your detention." She stood with a straight back and perfect posture. "So just keep deducting points, if you like, but unless you plan to use an Unforgivable to force us, we're not going."

"I'll take this to the headmaster. You'll both be suspended. Again for you, Potter."

"We'll see," Naomi said, reaching out to take Harry's wrist and lead him away as the Potion's Master stormed off.

When they were alone in a corridor, Harry yanked his hand away from Naomi and shouted, "What was that all about?"

“What was what all about?” she asked, looking rather shocked by his exclamation.

“That! Telling off Snape, telling him to take as many points as he likes but we won’t be going to detention. What was that?”

“That was nothing. He shouldn’t have treated you like that.”

“And who are you to say that?” he screamed, throwing his hands out wide. “Who are you at all?”

“I’m the one standing beside you,” Naomi said simply.

Harry shook his head. “No. That’s bullshit. You’re no one. You’re a practical stranger!”

“And you’re not real to me,” she returned. “You’re just a boy I heard about in stories growing up, a fairytale.”

“Exactly!” Harry exclaimed. “So why are you here?”

“Because you brought me here.”

“No.” Harry shook his head. “No. We’re nothing to each other. Ron, Hermione, they’re my best friends. The closest thing I have to family. The McGraths took care of me. Dumbledore, Sirius, McGonagall, Luna, Neville, even my aunt and cousin, they’re all people I know! Hell, even Snape is familiar here. But you? You’re just a girl I pass in the halls. So why is it that you are my secret keeper?”

“How would I know? I didn’t pick this!”

“Right! You’re just an innocent in all this who’s been able to take us home and hasn’t!”

“You don’t get to be mad at me,” Naomi said, “and you certainly don’t get to speak to me like that.”

“Like hell I don’t.”

"I had nothing to do with this," she said vehemently. "You dragged me out of my world, my comfortable bed. You took away my family and replaced them with these people. You brought Christine back into my life and shoved me into a relationship with Duncan Moran, who I normally refer to as Duncan-the-Moron in my head. You, who I don't even know beyond what I read in the paper and hear in the corridors, broke my life and gave me a version of it you seem to have haphazardly spell-o-taped back together. And I stayed here for you, so no, you do not get to yell at me."

Her exclamation made them both pause and look each other over one more time. Naomi stood with a strength and grace, asserting herself. Harry mentally changed his opinion about her right then; he had underestimated her. But that wasn't uncommon, Naomi was pretty enough that it was easy to forget that she was also strong, fierce, and a Gryffindor.

"What do you mean you stayed here for me?" Harry asked at last. "I thought you just let me stay here because Robert asked you to and you didn't want to mess with the big bad genie."

She looked at him incredulously. "Do you really think me so weak?"

"If not that, then why?" Harry asked, swinging his arm in a wide arch to gesture toward the grounds. "Why not go back to your normal life? Why leave us here?"

"Because I thought this was where you really wanted to be, and if that was the case," Naomi said quietly, reasonably, killing his anger in the process, "then you deserved to have it."

Harry took a moment. "What?"

"I know enough to know that if Robert brought you here, that meant that it was your one true wish to live in this world," Naomi elaborated, "and I would not take that away from you."

"Because I'm the Boy-Who-Lived?" Harry asked derisively.

“Yes,” Naomi said. He snorted in disgust and she looked at him like he was an enigma. “You act as if that were an empty title given to you for no reason, when in reality you were nicknamed for a night when you beat an Unforgivable, unblockable curse and vanquished Voldemort.”

“I didn’t vanquish him. He came back,” Harry argued.

Clearly frustrated with him for not getting the point, Naomi flung her hands out. “You encountered him again your first and fourth year, killed a Basilisk, faced a dragon, and defied Umbridge when she had you carving words in the back of your hand.” It was the most impassioned Harry had ever heard Naomi. She gestured toward him. “I had no idea you were like this, so unassuming, so uncomfortable being rewarded for all of that. You’ve done amazing things, but you seem to have convinced yourself that you’ve done nothing remarkable. But even if you’d been exactly as arrogant as Draco Malfoy so loudly claims you are, you would have deserved to live in the world of your dreams because of all that you have done.”

Thinking of his parents in that hospital room and Neville grimly learning that not all friends were true, Harry shook his head and said, “This isn’t the world of my dreams.”

Naomi’s eyebrows knit together and she made a slightly baffled sound. “You wished yourself into this place, didn’t you?”

“It was a mistake.”

“But this version of you, the boy I grew up with, he was happy.”

“I was happy in our world.”

“You were being hunted by dark wizards—”

“I had the Weasleys and Hermione. I even had my godfather for two years, which is much more time than I had here,” Harry said. “This”—he waved a hand vaguely at his scar—“thing with me and Voldemort isn’t all there is to my life.”

She took a deep breath and blinked back tears. He watched her, uncertain what to do to make her stop hurting. Naomi took a step forward, forcing him to hold her gaze. With her eyes she showed the thousands of things neither of them would be comfortable voicing, the secrets they hid, the journey they shared, the family they came to be.

“Do you want to go back?” she asked, sounding heartbroken for him.

Her simple, straightforward question surprised Harry, who blinked and took a moment to be sure before saying, “I really do.”

“Why?” she asked, voice breaking.

“Because I can’t ask someone else to do what I’ve done,” Harry said, looking away. “I can’t trust them to do it, either.”

“I know you’re extraordinary,” Naomi said. “I know that, but you don’t have to do this.”

“There’s no one else I would ask.”

Naomi, looking like she wanted to cry and scream and fall to her knees, turned to glare out the window. Finding resolve, Naomi looked at Harry with fierce eyes and said quietly, “If you want, I’ll take it. I don’t want it and it terrifies me, but I’ll take it. The prophecy. If that’s what it takes, I’ll take it.”

“No!” Harry said quickly. “I would never ask—”

“I’m offering.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

He was lost for words. “I don’t know. Just no.”

“Give me a reason,” she insisted.

“I can’t!”

“You can. Tell me why!”

“I—”

“Tell me why!” she insisted.

“Because I don’t know if you could do it!” Harry screamed.

Blinking up at him, she asked, “And you know that you can?”

“No!” Harry yelled. His voice echoed. Frustrated, he said, “But I’d rather risk my own life than yours.”

“But your greatest wish was to escape that.”

“No,” Harry said, remembering Robert’s words. “My greatest wish was for my friends to be properly protected.” For you to be protected.

“You’re only sixteen. It isn’t fair.”

“It doesn’t have to be fair.”

“Let me help you.”

“You’re only seventeen,” he said.

“But I—I’m not as good as you,” she said. “I don’t deserve all that I have. I just don’t. But you—you do. You deserve to see your parents and have the McGraths.”

“I don’t know what I deserve, but I know I need to be back in our world,” Harry said. “I know that now.”

Naomi was crying quietly, shaking her head. The sun ducked behind a cloud and shadows filled the corridor as Harry said, “I’m sorry I forced you to make this decision.”

Naomi shook her head and said sincerely, “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“Yes, I do,” Harry said. “I’m the reason—”

She interrupted him with that soft voice of hers. “When I woke up early this summer with two sets of memories, I thought I mad,” she said. “Why did I remember two pasts? Why was the Boy Who Lived suddenly also an annoying brother to me? Why did my sisters irritate me? Who was I?”

The confusion Harry had felt finding himself in a new world had been explained away almost instantly as he remembered the incident in the park. She must have been so lost, though. “If I’d have known you were my secret keeper, I would have explained.”

Naomi waved that off. “I didn’t need an explanation. I needed to make a choice, to decide which world would be real. So now I have to decide if Cedric Diggory or a family friend should die, and whether the Longbottoms or the Potters should be driven crazy. And I have to decide whether to put my life in your hands or in Neville Longbottom’s, which is really no choice at all.”

Harry stiffened. “Why? Because you wouldn’t choose either of us?”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t be thick, Harry.”

“Because you don’t have to choose,” Harry continued as if she hadn’t said anything. “I wouldn’t make you choose. I’ll decide. I have decided. It’s me.”

“Of course it’s you, Harry, that’s why there’s no choice involved,” Naomi said, “and of course you’ve decided that, because while I didn’t know you personally and you still think me a stranger, I remember the way you flew.”

Harry’s eyebrows knit together. “The way I flew?”

“I watched you fly circles around a dragon, hover about Quidditch games just at the edge of sight until the perfect moment. I watched you hurtle toward the ground, swallow the snitch, break your arm, fall off your broom, and dodge bludgers for five years,” she said. “It

wasn't hard to see that you were most comfortable in the air, a thousand feet above the ground."

Harry didn't quite understand what she meant.

"I don't want Neville and I certainly don't want this chaser-Harry. I want the Harry I saw summon his Firebolt and dodge a Hungarian Horntail. I want the Harry that lost the Second Task because he couldn't bear to see someone else fail and an innocent stranger hurt in the process. I want the Harry"—she started walking toward him—"that doesn't know how to talk to Alana. That doesn't need to make everyone laugh. If I have to choose, if I have to put my life on the line, if I have to trust someone to be a hero, I'll be damned if it's not you. The real you."

"I'm no hero," Harry said, shaking his head.

"You're too good to be real, too good to not be a hero, too good to throw away into a world of Junior National Quidditch, even if you might have been happier." She was within a foot and looked up at him, for he was taller than she. She put her hand on his cheek. "We are strangers in our world, Harry. I don't know you, and I don't think about you very much. We aren't friends or even acquaintances. And before I came here, I never stopped to think about what you've done for all of us, but now I've had the chance to see you, know you, trust you, and—Harry, you deserve not to bear the burden you do, but I would trust no one else with it."

Her hand was small and cold on his cheek, and Harry resisted the urge to lean into it. He trusted her too, though she must have known that because she was the secret keeper, but she was still a stranger in so many ways.

"So we're going back?" he asked, torn between hope and sadness.

Naomi let her hand drop and looked at it momentarily before glancing up. "Yes. I'll take you back."

The relief was instantaneous. "Now?"

Naomi nodded. "Now."

"Thank you," he said sincerely.

She nodded at him, soft brown eyes searching his face, and asked, "Was it worth it? Even if this wasn't your dream, was it worth coming here?"

"Yes," Harry said simply. He hadn't even thought about the answer.

"Because you met your parents?"

Harry nodded. "And other things."

Even if he hadn't met his parents, even if Harry hadn't had the chance to accept the fact that he belonged in his own world, Matt, Christine, and Alana would have made this wish worth the effort. Christine baked with her hands and cast Italian spells on him while walking through the dusty Roman forum with a cone of gelato. Matt ate dinner with him at pubs and expected him to drink ale, took him to his parents' hospital room, and worried about him. And Alana... Alana dragged him down the hall and into the kitchen, ate more eggs than Ron, flew until she fell asleep midair, trusting him to catch her before she fell off and hit the ground.

And all of them let him into their home every break, every suspension. They took him to their family villa and gave him his Gringott's key but still paid for all of his expenses. They said they loved him.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Harry," Naomi said, standing so solidly before him.

"You too, Naomi," Harry said, moving to shake her hand or something when she suddenly wrapped him in a hug and held him tightly. He found his arms embracing her without thought. She was his friend, he realized suddenly. A stranger, a confidant, and a friend all in one.

"You'll forget this soon," she said, her head buried in his shoulder, "and I'll forget being Petrified and eating breakfast with you."

“I’ll remember you.”

Tears began to slide out of Naomi’s eyes and Harry was upset by that, but she didn’t seem to mind as she said, “If the world is fair, I’ll find you back in our world. Not just because you’re famous, or because you’ve done amazing things, but because you’ve changed me for the better.”

This slight girl had sat with him at breakfast for months without saying a word, comfortable as he in silence. She had been dragged into this world and turned to stone. She thought he deserved to have his dreams come true. All in all, Naomi Ryan was rather special.

“I’ll find you,” Harry said with certainty.

She looked torn. “You deserve so much more than your stupid fame and the awful rumors. You deserve more than to live with a family that never sends you mail and whom you never thought would visit for the Triwizard Tournament. When everything else is forgotten and Christine and Matt and I mean nothing to you, I hope you remember that you are loved.” She leaned closer. “I love you.” Her lips landed on Harry’s and were soft and sweet and nothing like Cho’s. Naomi wanted to convey true affection, true care, she wanted to make him remember.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Get up, boy! I need you to watch the bacon!”

Aunt Petunia’s voice jumped around the room and shoved Harry out of his dream. Had he been dreaming? Had it been of Sirius again? No. It had been something else. Something extraordinary, though Harry couldn’t remember any of it. Like his old memory of the flying motorbike, Harry woke from this one with a sense of belonging, a sense of comfort.

Harry took a moment to sit up and look around. He suddenly felt like something was missing.

“Boy! Up!”

Harry sighed. "Coming, Aunt Petunia."

It would take a day or two for Harry to realize exactly what it was that he felt missing: it was the sense of betrayal, frustration, anger, and painful grief that had been with him since Sirius's death. Thinking of his godfather still hurt, of course. Thinking of the Department of Mysteries still made him sad, but then he would remember pieces of his dream, of a family that took him in without question and a sister who hadn't wanted him to leave. He remembered Neville and Luna and Hermione as they were not, and he remembered a girl named Naomi who made him feel like he was flying.

Waking up that morning, Harry felt as if he should be feeling something, but wasn't. He had lived with the feeling for so long that he didn't realize it wasn't a normal thing to constantly feel; when he woke up that morning for the first time in a long time—maybe ever—he didn't feel lonely.

Chapter 17

The Wishing World

Breakfast that morning was a rather fast affair; Dudley only popped into the kitchen long enough to devour three pancakes, some eggs, and a dozen pieces of bacon. Harry took what he wanted afterward and couldn't help thinking back on the dream he'd had the night before.

Now, the dream wouldn't have plagued him so much if it hadn't felt so real. Dreams of Quidditch flying, strange traveling adventures, and even visions of Voldemort felt distant. This one made him feel nostalgic and strangely comforted.

There was a family it in, a man, woman, and three children that he had liked. But they hadn't been his parents—the all had blonde hair and the name McGrath—but Harry had felt like he could trust them. And then there had been a girl involved, Naomi, which made him rather uncomfortable to think about because he was pretty sure there was a Gryffindor with that name in the year above him, and he remembered kissing her in the dream quite clearly.

The more Harry thought about it, the more he felt like it was real. It had to be real. He didn't have a very good imagination. The most exciting dream he'd ever had as a child had been of a flying motorbike, and that wound up being real. So how could he have dreamed up this entire world? A family he didn't know?

An idea suddenly hit him, and he found himself racing to his trunk, throwing open the top, and searching for the old photo album that Hagrid had given him his first year. Finding it tucked safely away in the bottom corner, Harry pulled it out and flipped through the pages until he was at the wedding photo.

And there they were, Matt and Christine McGrath, left-center, opposite Sirius, laughing along with all of them. Harry sank to the ground as more and more memories assaulted him: trips abroad,

talks in corridors, cooking in the kitchen, Parvati crying at him, Wormtail in the tunnel leading to Hogsmeade, sitting at the diner table talk to the older son, flying. Flying with someone rather small.

They were real. What did that mean?

Didn't Ginny have a friend named McGrath in her year? Didn't the fact that a picture existed with Christine and Matt in it open up the possibility that Harry had just combined all of these real people in some crazy dream? Maybe he had seen the blonde couple in the picture and put them together with the bloke in the year beneath him and made up that family in his dream. Hermione, Harry thought, would know the answers, but he dare not ask her in the mood she was in.

But that wasn't right. She wasn't in a foul mood. That had been part of the dream.

Harry needed answers, so grabbed his wand and money pouch from the trunk and went outside to summon the Knight Bus, unconsciously behaving as he had the first night at the Stump. Distracted and preoccupied, Harry stuck out his wand.

"Wotcher, Harry. What're you doing?" Tonks' friendly voice came from behind him, surprising him into momentarily forgetting to light his wand.

"I'm going to Diagon Alley," Harry replied as the young Auror moved to step in front of him.

"Are you running away again?" she said lightly.

"What? No." Why did she care that he was leaving? Oh right, because here he was constantly in danger. He'd almost forgotten.

"So I don't have to make sure no one in your house is blown up or anything? I heard about the incident with your uncle's sister and—"

"I just need to talk to someone," Harry said, cutting her off. He was tired and confused; Matt and Christine let him wander as he pleased,

even when he had been suspended from Hogwarts, why couldn't Tonks?

"Talk to whom?" Tonks' tone remained friendly, but her body never budged from its position between Harry and the road.

"An antique book seller," Harry replied. He supposed he might have yelled at her for the way she was treating him a few short weeks ago, but Christine had taught him patience.

"You never struck me as the type who reads a lot. Is it for Hermione?" Tonks asked. As she stood in front of him, Harry took the opportunity to look at her more closely. She had bags under her eyes; none of her features were outrageous, not even her hair, which fell in brown strands around her face. She looked sad.

"No, it's about a wish I made," Harry said, deciding to make the day a little easier for her.

Tonks didn't seem to know how to take that, but ended up just shrugging. "So you need to go to Diagon Alley?"

"Yes," Harry said. "It's full of witches and wizards. Voldemort wouldn't be stupid enough to go there yet." Why had he decided to say yet?

"It isn't safe," Tonks said. "The Ministry keeps pretending it is, but they don't do anything to actually protect it."

"Last year," Harry replied, "I was attacked by Dementors two blocks from here even though Dumbledore and all of you were watching. Is Magnolia Crescent that much safer?"

"Harry," Tonks said, "I can't let you leave alone."

"You could come with me, if you'd like," Harry said, reaching around her to stick his wand into the air. "Lumos."

Almost the moment his wand was lit, the Knight Bus jumped into existence in front of him, the door sliding open and the conductor

giving the usual spiel. Tonks, obviously not wanting to listen to the speech, nudged Harry with her foot.

“You’re sure you didn’t blow anyone up?” Tonks asked.

Harry almost smiled, but thoughts of the McGraths and the other Neville overwhelmed him. “No, I don’t think I did.”

“Do you think you could pop back in and try? I’m letting the most famous boy in the world wander away from the most secure location in England, and I don’t even have the excuse that his relations were going to kill him,” she said. Stan Shunpike’s pre-written blabbing ended and he began asking them questions.

“You know we picked up ‘arry Potter around ‘ere years ago, didn’ we, Ern?” Stan was saying as he peered at Harry. “You don’ ‘appen to know ‘im, do you?”

“Obliviate,” Tonks whispered, a jet of blue light hitting him squarely in the face. The bloke blinked a couple of times, asked them where they were going, accepted their fare, and didn’t bother them again.

Once they were seated comfortably, Tonks said, “Moody is going to blow out his other eye in rage, and then try to rip out for both of mine when he hears about this.”

“You tried to stop me,” Harry offered.

“Moody never cared much for ‘trying,” Tonks replied. “Besides which, if I’d wanted to stop you, I could’ve.”

“Then why didn’t you?” Harry wanted to know.

Tonks tapped her foot against the floor a couple of times and a couple of buildings jumped out of the way of the bus before she finally said, “Because you don’t deserve to be locked up just because of Voldemort.”

Harry had no doubt that she was thinking about Sirius right then—he was too—but whether or not the dream was real, it was true that

Harry had somehow managed to progress rather far into his grief process. It both hurt and helped to remember the way the dream version of Remus told him how much he wished he generous he thought a world was that gave Harry two years with a free Sirius.

"I did something foolish at the beginning of the holiday," Harry admitted aloud, trying to distract Tonks from her sad thoughts and feeling like the truth was the best thing to talk about. He was surprised to find how easy it was to talk about all of this after having already explained it to Christine and Naomi and knowing they understood his motives. They had supported and trusted him, Christine had looked out for him and Naomi had stayed in a broken world to make him happy. Remembering that, it was impossible to feel intimidated by the prospect of Tonks having a negative opinion.

"You've only been home from school less than a week," the Auror said. "I still consider this to be the beginning of the holiday."

Now, that surprised Harry, though he supposed it shouldn't. Obviously Robert would have put him back in the time before he left, right? But maybe it really had been a dream. Maybe he had never wandered into that park and yelled at the sky. It was so hard to keep things straight.

"I need to know if I'm going mad or not," Harry said. It was weird to speak so honestly about all of this, to give real answers, but Christine had apparently rubbed off on him because Harry had no problem telling Tonks the truth. Or maybe his tendency in the other world to tell the truth to everyone because he knew they wouldn't remember had merely stayed with him. That could eventually be a real problem.

"You're worried about your sanity? I'm letting you go to Diagon Alley. I don't know how I'll explain this to Dumbledore," Tonks muttered, leaning her head against the window even as her eyes scanned the bus for possible threats.

"No matter what you say, he won't believe you," Harry replied automatically. His own words took him by surprise. Maybe his experiences in that wish-world had really changed him.

“Leaky Cauldron!” the conductor announced upon their arrival. Harry thought that the last trip had taken a longer time, but he had been thirteen and impatiently running from the law, so maybe his memory was skewed. That and they had made a couple of other stops the first time.

The odd pair of Auror and Boy-Who-Lived lowered their heads (and Tonks transfigured a newspaper into a cap for Harry to wear) and made their way through the crowded pub. Despite her occasionally tendency to trip and run into things, Tonks was a rather gifted Auror, capable of deflecting attention and taking care of her charge. She felt rather confident in her abilities, but the idea of accompanying Harry Potter through a crowded day at Diagon Alley still did not appeal to her. Well, maybe it did a little, but not enough to cackle with glee or anything. Just enough to make her forget her grief for a time.

They reached the used bookstore quickly enough, and Harry found himself overwhelmed with doubts the moment he saw the familiar storefront. What if Robert wasn't there? What if he had made up the entire thing, incorporating the figure of the bookstore owner he'd run into his third year? What if he was mad?

“Are you going in?” Tonks asked, seeing his hesitation. Harry remembered what it felt like to know his parents were alive and be too afraid to face them, too afraid to go through the Floo Network and wind up at a room where his parents might not like him. He also remembered the feeling of actually meeting his mother and father, and the regret he felt for not doing it sooner. He remembered what it felt like to fear something so deeply that it didn't even feel like fear, more like revulsion. It felt a lot like this, and he had promised himself not to let that fear control him ever again.

“Yes,” Harry said, reaching out for the handle. He walked through and she followed, shutting the door firmly behind her. Door chime still ringing, Harry and Tonks stood just on the inside of the store. It looked just as Harry remembered, selves of old, dusty books lining the walls, an old-fashioned cash register sitting on the counter, a man in a well-tailored suit standing behind it, ready to give you whatever you wanted. It was Robert.

“Welcome,” the older wizard said, inclining his head at the pair.

Through his surprise and doubt, Harry managed to ask, “Do you know me?”

The man’s lips lifted in an imitation of bemusement. “Everyone knows Harry Potter.”

“But you—do you know me personally?” he asked, determined to know the answer whether or not it meant he was losing his mind.

“Do you know me?” Robert asked. “Do you know me as something more than a shopkeeper?”

Harry hesitated, but managed to say, “Yes. I think I do.”

Robert nodded, walking around the counter and leaning against it, hands in his pockets. “Then I don’t mind telling you, I know you too.”

“Then—then was it real?” Harry asked, torn between hope and dread.

“Yes,” Robert said simply, taking his hands and folding them together in front of him. Tonks looked back and forth between them, but remained silent. Aurors were taught to listen carefully.

“Everything? The McGraths? My parents? St. Mungo’s?” Harry asked, trying to wrap his mind around the possibilities. Naomi?

“Everything,” Robert confirmed, for the first time since they’d met, answering Harry directly.

“So I really made that stupid wish?” Harry asked, lowering his gaze to the ground as he realized the enormity of his folly.

“I’ve told you before, it wasn’t a stupid wish,” Robert said seriously, taking a step forward. “You thought it was the way to be with your family while protecting everyone you love. The only problem was that your wish had longer-reaching effects than you imagined possible because you thought yourself expendable.”

Harry remembered the Chamber and watching Neville go into the tunnel in the sink. He remembered Naomi Petrified and Dumbledore looking at him like he was a stranger. He remembered hearing about the Ministry officials who were working to hunt down Wormtail and wishing he were with them.

"I came back. I didn't want anyone else to have to do it all," Harry said by way of explanation.

"And you didn't actually trust anyone else."

Harry felt briefly ashamed. "No, I didn't."

"For what it's worth, I don't either," Robert said earnestly. "You've done impossible things."

Harry shook his head briefly. "I've been lucky a lot, luckier than anyone else might have been."

"That's certainly true," Robert said, not unkindly. The minute hand on the grandfather clock in the corner clicked on. "I thought you might come in today, to have your memories erased."

"You thought I might come in?" Harry repeated rather bitterly. The last time he'd seen the genie had been when he'd frozen the Great Hall and demanded that Harry choose a replacement, knowing he couldn't. "You think you know everything, don't you? You've had me figured out from the beginning, knew who I'd trust, knew I'd come back here. You forced a reverse, as you said. You had all the answers from the beginning, didn't you?"

Robert shook his head. "I have no answers but those which I see in the wishes of men."

"You're rather subdued today, aren't you?" Harry asked.

"Erasing a world is rather subduing business," Robert retorted.

Taking a breath, Harry soberly said, "Blame me for that. It was my wish."

"You blame yourself enough for the both of us," the bookseller replied. "I'll just add this to my own pile of regrets, thanks all the same."

"Do you really regret it?" Harry asked, looking desperately at Robert.

"I always do," Robert said.

"Then why do you keep doing it?" Harry asked. "Why do you keep granting wishes to people who can't keep them and creating worlds only to destroy them? Remembering my life over there, all that I did, it makes me want to change the way this world happened, scream at someone. I want to know why I was left with the Dursleys here when there were other options out there."

"And it makes me want to hex someone, knowing I can't make it a better place for the ones who deserve it," Robert said, "but I can't stop granting wishes just because it upsets me."

"Why not?" Harry asked. "If it's such a horrible obligation, why not give up?"

"The same reason why you chose to come back to this world, the same reason you'll some day face Voldemort without complaint," he said, shrugging. "And because people deserve to find the place they need to be."

"And this world is where I need to be," Harry said.

"I know it. I do." Robert sounded so sorrowful about that fact that Harry began to wonder just how much Robert knew about his childhood, about growing up with the Dursleys. From his comment that day on Privett Drive, Harry supposed he had to know a lot. That thought might have made him uncomfortable and bitter a short while ago. But now Harry knew Robert also remembered a different childhood for Harry, one with toy brooms and pancakes, where Christine and Matt provided for his every need and Andy McGrath was his best friend, a world where—

Harry stopped breathing for a moment.

"They're all here," Harry said wondrously as the realization came to him. Christine and Matt and Andy and all of them still existed here, even if they hadn't raised him. That picture he'd seen proved that. The fact that he remembered Andy and Naomi for Hogwarts was proof enough. He could find them. He didn't need to live in another universe to have them in his life, he could just tell them about that world.

Robert shook his head, following Harry's train of thought. "They won't remember."

"Naomi will," Harry said, practically bubbling over with excitement. If he had tried to at that moment, he was sure he could have made the very best Patronus. "And the McGraths will understand. I'll tell them what happened. Christine remembers you. She'll understand."

Robert said, "I thought you came to have your memories erased."

"What?" Harry asked, shocked. "What would be the point of that?"

"You'll understand soon enough." Robert spoke as if to himself. "After you stumble upon the ones you knew, you'll understand."

"I have to go. Thanks for everything," Harry said, not really listening to what Robert said or even hearing himself. His desire to find his surrogate family practically pushed him out of the door, which made the bell jingle again.

"Where are we going?" Tonks asked, reminding Harry that she was there. He'd almost forgotten.

"The Stump," he said smilingly. He didn't notice Robert sitting down on a chair in the corner or Tonks trying to think of a way to convince him to just go home. Instead, he swept out of the Alley, ran through the Leaky Cauldron, and found himself once again on the Knight Bus with the brown-haired Auror.

"This is so weird business you've caught yourself up in, isn't it?" Tonks asked.

“Not so weird. Not really,” Harry said. “I made a wish and it came true, simple as that.”

“And you went to another world and had a different family?”

“And I realized I have to be the one in the prophecy,” Harry said, still too happy about the prospect of seeing the McGraths and Naomi to pay much attention to the current conversation. “I don’t want it, but I’m willing to do it.”

“Well, that’s fine. I don’t know what prophecy you’re talking about, but it’s still fine. What’s not fine is the man in the store saying he destroyed a world and you telling him you’d take the blame.”

“That’s his job. He’s the genie,” Harry said simply. He wasn’t sure whether or not the McGraths would live in the Stump in this world, but he couldn’t think of a reason why they would move. He did worry that they might be on holiday somewhere live their villa, but figured the Stump was the best place to start looking.

“The genie?” Tonks repeated, eyes widening. “That was Robert the Genie?”

“Is he really famous?” Harry asked wonderingly. It didn’t occur to him that just because Naomi and Christine knew him that other people might actually know Robert. Maybe Hermione was right and Harry should have paid more attention in History of Magic.

“That couldn’t have been him. He is supposed to only work with wishes that change the world—oh, well, I suppose that would be you, wouldn’t it?” Tonks sounded rather surprised. Harry wasn’t sure when he’d last heard the cool and collected Auror surprised. Well, okay, she exclaimed a lot when she ran into things, but beside that.

“He does small wishes. He fulfilled Christine’s and that only effected like six or seven people,” Harry remembered. Besides which, Harry had a feeling that Robert might like fulfilling as many wishes as possible to make sure they went correctly according to his own moral code.

“Arbor Street, East Side,” Stan announced as the bus pulled up outside the Stump. Harry jumped up and went to the front of the bus, thanking Stan and the driver as he hopped down the stairs onto the sidewalk. Tonks stepped down beside him and they stood gazing at the Stump.

“Who lives here?” Tonks asked cautiously.

“The McGraths,” Harry said. “Old friends of my parents.”

“All right then,” Tonks said, seeming to gear herself up for her next big moment of acceptance.

The house looked exactly the same, Harry thought as he made his way up the brick walkway. He wondered if Alana would be home. If she were, she’d be flying around the backyard. Harry knocked on the door, and if he had been the time to have excitement make him shake, he would be a mess. As it was, Harry’s body stilled and his senses heightened in the face of his nerves and anxiousness. As she had at the bookstore, Tonks took the opportunity to change her features; it wouldn’t do for her to be associated with watching Harry.

Harry was expecting to either have Christine or Matt open the door, or have to travel to Italy to find them. Instead, Naomi Ryan was the one standing in the threshold when the door opened.

“Harry?” she asked, clearly shocked to see him standing on the McGrath’s front porch.

“Naomi? What are you doing here?” The word was spoken before he properly thought about it. Maybe she had thought it was a dream as well. Harry realized as he asked the question that it was stupid; their families had been close in the other world, it wasn’t strange that they would be in this one as well.

“We’re visiting Uncle Matt,” she explained in her soft voice.

“Oh,” Harry said, “well, I’m here to see him and Christine.”

Naomi's face paled and Harry wondered if it was because she, like him, was thinking about the kiss she'd given him before she brought them both back. She had told him to remember, and he had. "Oh Harry—"

"Who's at the door, dear?" Mrs. Ryan—Harry recognized her from the couple of times they'd met throughout the year—asked as she stepped up behind Naomi.

"Just a friend from school," Naomi said, keeping the door mostly shut.

"Well, why's he visiting you here?" her mother asked, pulling the door open and peering at the Harry. And as always happened when Harry met new people, there was a flash of recognition and disbelief in her eyes. "Harry Potter?"

Harry nodded sheepishly. He still hated that reaction. "I'm here for the McGraths."

"Of course. Of course," she said, obviously overwhelmed by the unexpected celebrity in front of her. Naomi looked a bit sick. "Which of the boys are you here to see?"

"Actually, I'm here to see Matt and Christine," Harry answered.

Mrs. Ryan, who had been about to turn to fetch whomever Harry wanted, paused. "Excuse me?"

"He's just found an old photo, Mum," Naomi cut in before Harry could say anything, "of his parents with Matt and Christine. He realized they were friends and came over to—"

"Oh. Yes," Mrs. Ryan said, looking sympathetically at Harry. Naomi's gaze fell to the ground so that she didn't see the grateful look Harry shot her way for her cover story. It wouldn't do to say, I just visited another universe where they had adopted me.

"Do you think I might talk to them?" Harry asked.

“Well Matt’s home, but I hate to be the one to tell you, dear,” Mrs. Ryan said, stepping forward and reaching out to lay a hand lightly on his shoulder, “that Christine died a number of years ago.”

This might be the closest anything could ever come to making Harry feel like the world had stopped spinning.

“What?” Harry managed to squeeze the word through his suddenly tight throat as disbelief splashed all over his thoughts.

“It was a terrible accident with Dementors, a neo-Death Eater group set them free just outside the Ministry and—it was terrible.” The woman’s tone did nothing to quell Harry’s hurt.

“No,” Harry said, shaking his head. It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be true. Why hadn’t she been attacked in the other world?

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Ryan said, clearly surprised by his forceful reaction to the news that someone he’d never met had died. She reached out to put a hand on his arm, which he managed to dodge instinctively.

“Harry,” Naomi said, but she didn’t add anything. Harry just continued to shake his head and stare out at the distance.

“Naomi?” her mother asked, looking worriedly between the two obviously distraught teens.

“Mum, give us a minute please,” Naomi asked tightly, stepping outside and shutting the door so that she and Harry were on one side alone.

“You knew?” His words were soft, painful. “You knew she wasn’t alive here?”

“Harry—”

“You knew?” Louder this time. He trusted her. He really had. Despite everything, despite his anger about the situation and blaming her and calling her a stranger, he truly had trusted Naomi. And now to know

that she had kept this information from him... it was unthinkably painful.

"I told you I had to decide the fate of Cedric Diggory and a family friend," Naomi said, words laced with sadness and resolve.

"You didn't tell me it was Christine!" Harry accused, his eyes watering despite his best efforts. Was she really dead?

"A life is a life. It would have been horrible no matter who--"

"You should have told me."

"You and I hadn't talked in two days and then we had that fight. I realized that you didn't want to be there either and you kept agreeing with me that we needed to go back and demanding that it be soon."

"I didn't know about Christine!" Harry exclaimed. "I didn't know—how could you do it?"

"How could I not?" Naomi asked. "I had to choose between a world where Neville was wished into a position he couldn't handle and a world where you were the Boy-Who-Lived, scraping by and surviving and fighting."

"It wasn't worth it. Me being the Boy-Who-Lived isn't worth her life," he said accusingly.

"You don't think this hurts me too?" Naomi asked, tears beginning to run down her cheeks. "Christine was a second mother to me; Stevie and Andy are like my brothers, and I chose to bring you back here. I chose to give her up."

"What about Alana?" Harry's voice hardened as her words made him block off a piece of his heart.

Naomi's entire face seemed to crumble. "Christine died before Alana was born."

Harry shook his head. Shook it again.

“No. No. I told Alana I’d find her. When I was telling her goodbye, I promised her I’d find her again. I have to find her again.” Harry wouldn’t believe it until he walked into the Stump and saw her little bedroom and checked the backyard and talked to Matt and— Harry tried to clear his thoughts, but found them more muddled than ever.

The world was closing in on him. It felt like the Department of Mysteries, watching that stupid veil wave in the non-existent wind as Remus held him back. It felt like Naomi had slashed him with a knife.

“Harry, she’s gone. They’re both gone.” Naomi was crying as she sank to the ground and wrapped her arms around her bent knees. Harry leaned against the door and slide down slow to join her, standing seeming to take too much energy. “And it hurts like nothing else, but it wasn’t real. It was a wish world, created from your dreams.”

“Does that make it easier for you to know you erased them?” Harry asked thickly.

Naomi looked angry for a moment before looking down. “No, it doesn’t.”

It didn’t help him either, and in truth Harry was blaming himself even as he fought to disbelieve Naomi’s story, fought to believe that Christine and Alana might be hiding behind a door waiting to surprise him or maybe the Aurors put them into hiding and something happened to keep them from coming back or...

“She knew, Harry,” Naomi said softly. “Christine knew what it meant for her if you came back to this world.”

“No,” Harry said, looking over at her and shaking his head. “She couldn’t have.”

“She was the reason I confronted you that day in the rain,” Naomi said, voicing breaking. “She wrote me a letter telling me that she knew about your wish and that she thought I was the one you would have trusted with the memory of this world. She said that you

explained that didn't know her and that she could only think of one reason why she wouldn't be in your life, and that was if she had died. She said she would have—"

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "No, you're wrong."

"She asked me to remind you not to hate her."

The words were like a punch to the stomach. Christine had asked him not to hate her. She begged him practically and Harry had sat there and told her he never could. She told him not to make such promises. But no. No, it wasn't right and Harry said so, "She wouldn't have just given up like that."

"She wasn't giving up," Naomi said. "She was giving you the world you needed. Giving the world the you it needed."

"No. Why wouldn't she have told me?"

"Because she thought her life shouldn't make your decision for you," Naomi said, resting her forehead on her knees so that she didn't have to look at Harry. "She said you needed to pick the right world for you. She said she wanted you in the right world for you."

"And you?" Harry asked. "Why didn't you keep me from leaving?"

"Because she was right," Naomi said, looking up with tearstains on her cheeks, though the tears had stopped running. "More people than just Christine died."

"Yeah, Cedric Diggory did too," Harry snapped, pushing off the ground to stand and pace down the walkway.

A man's voice interrupted from the road behind them, saying, "And in that wish world, the family at the Quidditch World Cup died since Neville's grandmother insisted on so many Aurors evacuating them." Harry and Naomi turned to see Robert standing rather humbly at the end of the walkway. "Besides which there were dozens of people who went missing this past year. Neville isn't you, Harry: he didn't go to a graveyard and witness Voldemort coming back; he didn't go to the

press with his story of scar-induced dreams. No one knew. So when they found things like Dumbledore's brother in pieces on the Dove Coast last week, it was a horrific shock, but no one dared speculate that it was You-Know-Who back from the dead."

Harry wanted to channel all of his anger and frustration and sadness at Robert, wanted to blame him for Christine dying and Alana not existing, but looking at him standing so sadly in the road, knowing he the pain he must feel destroying worlds, it was difficult to make him responsible for so much more. So Harry swallowed his pain as best he could.

"What is this?" Naomi asked. Harry heard her stand up and glanced at her to see what she was talking about. She was staring at Tonks. With a jolt, Harry remembered that the Auror had accompanied him here, but he needn't have worried what she heard for she was frozen in place.

"It's the moment you asked your mother for," Robert answered.

"He took us out of time," Harry said in a hollow voice, trying to make it simpler even as he felt like crying and screaming and praying for Christine.

"Do you see now why people have their memories erased?" Robert asked Harry, who almost nodded without thinking.

"What do you mean erased?" Naomi sounded panicked.

"I mean that you won't have to remember the world you chose to leave. You will both remember the conclusions you reached, the peace you've found, the turmoil you've overcome, but you will forget the memories," Robert said.

"No," Naomi replied fiercely. "No, I won't let you."

Robert looked at her curiously. "It isn't optional."

"I don't want to forget growing up there, teaching Alana how to pump her legs on a swing, crying to Christine about Duncan, and screaming

at Harry. I won't give that up," Naomi said, and it was only then that Harry realized he would forget the McGraths altogether, forget his family, his friends, Naomi and her sisters.

"I don't want to forget either," Harry said forcefully.

"The grief you're feeling now will be gone," Robert tried to reason.

"Only because you'll steal from us the memories of better times," Naomi returned.

"I can live with this pain," Harry said. If it meant remembering that world, he would live with the grief of missing Christine and Alana.

"You watched your closest replacement fail to fill your shoes, you learned what it was to be loved. You'll remember those sensations. You'll remember the acceptance you feel about your destiny now, but you will forget that you sent Sirius Black to the Dementors and hated Remus Lupin." Robert tried to sell the story. Harry wasn't buying it.

Harry set his jaw stubbornly. "I won't remember baking with Christine or meeting my parents."

"But you'll feel like you truly understand your parents, like you know what it is to have a family. You'll have accepted your godfather's passing to a degree and accepted your role in this war without bitterness," Robert said. "It's the only way."

"And Christine?" Naomi asked.

"Will be the mother of your friend who died before you were really old enough to know her," Robert said to Naomi before turning to Harry, "and to you she will be the pretty blonde woman in your old photo album, who may make you feel rather good about yourself when you look at her, but you won't know why."

"We don't want to forget the memories," Naomi repeated, speaking for both of them. Harry found he didn't mind, and realized that was another thing he did not want to lose: his trust in Naomi.

"I can't let you remember. The rules are clear." He sounds confused and regretful.

"Will you forget?" Naomi challenged.

Robert looked from the thin girl to the house and back to Harry. "Someday I hope I might, but no. I won't today."

"Then why should we have to?" Harry asked. He wanted to remember the family, the advice from Matt, Christine's flower-covered hand on his cheek, Stevie playing chess with him in the common room, and Andy laughing with Nadia on the tour bus in Rome. He didn't want vague sensations of family. He wanted these memories. He wanted to remember sitting by Naomi every morning, and the feeling of relief that overwhelmed him when she said she would take him home. Hell, he even wanted to remember how horrible he felt during this conversation.

"We won't tell anyone," Naomi reasoned. "We just don't want to let the memories go."

"They aren't memories. Not really. They're dreams. That world wasn't real. Despite what you feel right now, Alana McGrath never existed and Christine McGrath died on the way to a Ministry hearing regarding her claim to the adoption of Harry Potter," Robert said. Harry wanted to throw up. Christine had died in this world and not the other because here the Ministry had watched him more closely and required her to come to a hearing for the adoption? She had died on her way to take care of Harry.

Naomi glared and took a step forward, saying, "That was unnecessary."

"It was true, and he'll forget that too because people should only remember one world," the genie said, looking over at the quietly beautiful Naomi Ryan. He raised one hand in her direction and one toward Harry, and both disappeared as Robert reset the day and put the children back in their beds, modifying their memories.

Robert the Genie had been at his job for nearly three centuries. In that time, he had granted millions of wishes—wishes to be prettier, to be richer, wishes to have the love of their life back or the job they never thought they could, wishes to destroy an enemy and own a nation. So many wishes for so many selfish people. He had gotten so good at his job that he knew a person's one true wish before they spoke it and felt rather jaded about the whole business. But then he had been called to Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, and found that the fifteen year old merely wanted to find a replacement for himself so that someone dependable could protect the fate of the world. That was a wish Robert certainly understood.

So the genie had quickly considered all of the worlds that he could create; he decided to create the world where Neville was the Boy-Who-Lived because Harry had been happy growing up there, which was more than Robert could say for this world. Petunia Dursley's wish was that her sister had been normal because she assumed that would be the only way to protect her family from the awful things that happened to them, including her sister's marriage to that Potter man. Vernon Dursley's wish was that his wife's family had never existed, which was cataclysmically stupid since Robert could just make it so that Petunia wasn't born either and force a reverse. Dudley Dursley wanted to be a famous celebrity with lots of money and women at his disposal.

How Harry Potter came from a cupboard under that family's stairs baffled Robert.

Naomi Ryan's one true wish was to help people who couldn't help themselves; it was that simple. She made the best Secret Keeper Robert had seen in decades.

They were good people, those two, and they deserved to have their wishes fulfilled; that was why Robert decided against making them completely forget the world they shared. Instead, he left echoes of each other in Naomi and Harry's minds, hoping they might have an occasion to run into one another and feel a strange connection, as if they were naturally comfortable together. They would never feel lonely with that feeling hidden away in their minds.

Of course, Robert could have been in trouble for bending the rules so boldly, but Robert couldn't imagine the other genies minding much.

So after settling the matters that needed settling and seeing the students put safely to bed, Robert went back to his dusty old bookshop in Diagon Alley where to this day he stands behind a shiny oak counter and rings up purchases on an iron cash register. He doesn't need the money, he has a dozen vaults in Gringotts from the younger days when he thought to collect gold and vases, but now he mostly sells old books and walks down the magical alley with his hands in his neatly tailored suit pockets watching wishers. Few people recognize him as anything spectacular. Those who do tend to flinch away from him, but he's learned to ignore that the way Harry Potter ignores people staring at his scar.

Robert is a man who knows the deepest desires of the most important and the most menial people in the world, a man who controls fates, creates men, and destroys worlds. He is the living will of men's truest wishes, and he remembers a world where Voldemort was a bird and Harry Potter was best known as a Quidditch player. Robert alone remembers a thousand horrible worlds he has created and erased, a thousand worlds where someone might have been happy if they'd been willing to become someone they were not.

He also remembers a boy and a girl who were the first to ever ask to join him in remembering the dead world they visited, and he wishes he could have let them.